Seirei Tsukai no Blade Dance Volume 5

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【著者】

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(*∀*)o彡゜裸ニーソ！裸ニーソ！（←やや巻き舌でラニーソと発音）というわけで５巻ではニーソ精霊エストが表紙になりました。彼女の素足にはいったいどんな秘密が隠されているのか――バトルもラブコメも大加速の「精霊使いの剣舞」、どうぞよろしくお願いいたします！

第四回ＭＦ文庫Ｊライトノベル新人賞受賞。なごみ系ケルトコメディ『やってきたよ、ドルイドさん！』シリーズ、お城擬人化ファンタジー『白銀の城姫』シリーズを上梓。写真はメ切前にひとりマニアックなボードゲームで遊ぶ作者（現実逃避中）。

【イラストレーター】

桜はんぺん
さくら・はんぺん

4月6日生まれのゲーム原画家、イラストレーター。
原画担当に『さくらビットマップ』、『SuGirly　Wish』（HOOKSOFT）など。
好きなことは絵を描くこと、睡眠。
HP「Petite*Cerisier」
http://petitecerisier.moo.jp/

カバーイラスト／桜はんぺん　装丁／百足屋ユウコ（ムシカゴグラフィクス）

精霊使いの剣舞（ブレイドダンス）5

魔王殺しの聖剣

志瑞祐
Illustration
桜はんぺん

MF文庫 J
し-04-11

精霊使いの剣舞（ブレイドダンス）5
魔王殺しの聖剣
志瑞祐

魔王殺しの聖剣

剣精霊の無使い 5

ブレイドダンス

志瑞祐
Illustration
桜はんぺん

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精霊使いの剣舞（ブレイドダンス）５　魔王殺しの聖剣

エストを失ったカミト。エストは戻らないまま〈精霊剣舞祭（ブレイドダンス）〉本戦は開幕し、竜騎士レオノーラたちがカミトに迫ってくる。失意に沈むカミトだが、クレアたちの（獣耳コスプレなどの）協力のもと、少しずつエストの過去に触れてゆく。そこでカミトが見たものは、はるか昔の、伝説の聖剣と、救世の聖女と呼ばれたひとりの少女の物語だった。「ねえ、エスト」「なんでしょうか、マスター」「いつまでも、私のそばにいてくれる？」それはとてもあたたかな記憶。そして失われるぬくもり。最後に残されたのは、冷たい指先と……。闇の中で彼女は祈り続ける。繰り返される罪と、罰と、決して得られぬはずの赦しを願いながら――。エレメンタル・ファンタジー第５弾！

MF文庫J

志瑞祐の本

やってきたよ、ドルイドさん！ 1～3［イラスト：絶叫］

白銀の城姫（ベルクフリート） 1～3［イラスト：上田夢人］

精霊使いの剣舞（ブレイドダンス） 剣と学院と火猫少女
［イラスト：桜はんぺん］

精霊使いの剣舞（ブレイドダンス） 2 ロスト・クイーン
［イラスト：桜はんぺん］

精霊使いの剣舞（ブレイドダンス） 3 風の誓約
［イラスト：桜はんぺん］

精霊使いの剣舞（ブレイドダンス） 4 精霊剣舞祭
［イラスト：桜はんぺん］

精霊使いの剣舞（ブレイドダンス） 5 魔王殺しの聖剣
［イラスト：桜はんぺん］

魔王殺しの聖剣

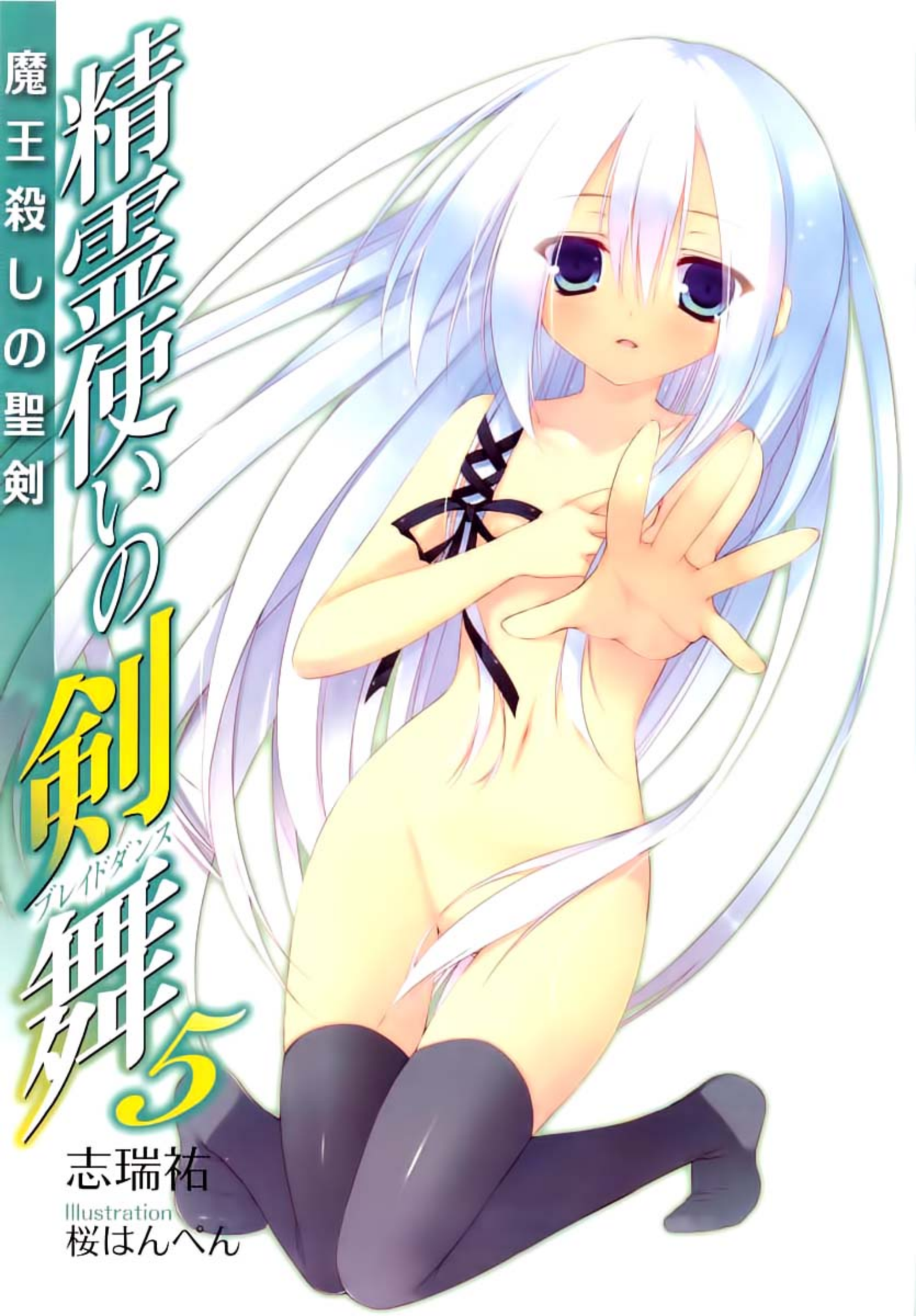
精霊使いの剣舞 5

ブレイドダンス

志瑞祐

Illustration

桜はんぺん



「……う、お、おい……！」

狭いベッドの上に、
ちょっとえっちな獣の格好をした
美少女が三人。
ぎゅうぎゅうと押し合って、
露出した肩が腕に触れる。

Rinslet Laurenfrost
リンスレット・ローレンフロスト

Elis Farlengart
エリス・ファーレンガルト

Claire Rouge
クレア・ルージュ

Leonora Lancaster
レオノーラ・ランカスター
「あ、あれ……
み、見えちゃった……？」
「大丈夫です。
竜に仕えるドラクニアの姫様は、
下着を身に着けませんから」
すすす――と、さらにまくり上げられるスカート。
すでにギリギリの領域まで
達しているはずだが――
なぜか、下着はまだ見えない。

「あなたの名前は？」
「私の真名は人間の言語では発声できませんが、精霊語では〈テルミヌス・エスト〉と」
「テルミヌス・エスト……ちょっと長いから、エストね」
「エストではありません。テルミヌス・エストです」
「だめよ、それだと呼びにくいじゃない。あなたの名前はエストよ」
少女はにこっと微笑み、エストの頭をすりすり撫でる。
「やめてください、マスター」

エスト

精霊使いの剣舞 5

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Prologue

He was watching a dream.

An extremely vivid dream— to the extent that he understood that he was within a dream.

The flashing of swords. The clashing of blades.

While walking down a corridor dyed red with the blood of countless soldiers—

The one swinging a sword of shining light, was a girl with beautiful golden hair.

Flowing movements like that of the blade dance, cutting down all sorts of spirits that came at her.

The girl's figure gave off a sense of deja vu.

Up till present times, there were many existing artworks of her, like portraits, sculptures and paintings.

Areishia Idriss.

The Sacred Queen who had once overthrown the Demon King.

.....Why did I dream of her?

Here he did not have a physical body that he could move, only his consciousness drifted through this clear dream, bearing that question.

From when exactly was this dream from?

Furthermore— *whose dream was it?*

In the midst of his clear consciousness— eventually, he reached *that moment* that was recorded in history.

Defeating the last spirit, the girl slowly walked out the corridor, heading into the deepest depths of the castle.

Raising the «Sacred Sword» which was radiating light in the air with both hands, she raised her head, looking at the throne.

There, was seated a lone man, his composure calm.

The area around the throne was wreathed in dark flames, and thus his features could not be identified.

However, who it was that was seated on that throne, was intuitively understood with just a glance.

The Demon King Solomon—

In the past, he had brought calamity and destruction across the lands, the worst tyrant to have gone down in history.

Dominating the powerful spirits of the seventy-two pillars, the only existing male elementalist.

Ominous dark flames danced menacingly around him, as though threatening the girl.

However, the girl did not falter.

Because within her hand was held a sacred sword, empowering her heart.

"Evil Demon King, by the names of the Elemental Lords and my sacred sword, begone."

As the blowing wind sent her golden hair billowing, the girl dashed onward's.

Engraved on the blade of the sacred sword, in the language of the spirits, was a name giving off a silver light—

The instant I saw that name, I shouted out.

"**—Est!**"

Chapter 1: The Broken Sacred Sword

Part 1

"—!?"

Waking up, he found himself on his soft bed.

... He sat up and looked back down at himself.

He was not wearing his school uniform, but rather a set of loose pajamas. It seemed that someone had helped him change while he was unconscious.

The dream he witnessed had caused him to break out into a cold sweat.

"I —"

What on earth —

Trying to recall the events that happened before he fainted, Kamito rubbed his dully aching head.

At that moment —

"Kamito, you're awake?"

From the corner of the room came a voice.

Kamito turned, and saw a beautiful girl in uniform sitting on a chair by the wall.

She had two red ponytails on the sides of her head.

Her translucent ruby-red pupils gazed anxiously in his direction.

"... Claire, you haven't been here all this time, have you ?"

"Eh? No, not very long at all..."

Claire frantically shook her head.

However, dark circles at the corners of her eyes belied the fact that she had not had a good night's rest.

"I apologize for making you worry."

"I-It's nothing, I wasn't worrying."

Kamito returned Claire's concern with a wry smile, and took a look around the room.

This castle room had been arranged for the participants of the «Blade Dance». Looking at its spacious windows and quality household items, one could tell that this was not Kamito's usual residence, which was no different from a storage room, but a room from some unknown other place.

With dawn quickly approaching, the sun shone weakly through a slit in the curtains.

"That's good, get some sleep now. Your fever has not fully gone down."

"Ah? I have a fever?"

"Mmhm, it appears to have gotten better now, but you were burning up quite badly just a moment ago."

Claire bent over and placed her hand on Kamito's forehead.

The touch of her ice-cold skin felt incredibly comfortable. .... Oh. There was indeed still a bit of a lingering fever.

"Anyways, Claire –"

"Yes, what is it?"

"Uh, why did I faint?"

".....You don't remember?"

Claire's eyes opened wide in surprise.

"Don't tell me you have amnesia..."

"No, nothing that serious. It's just that my head's still groggy and I can't seem to remember what happened right before I blacked out."

Kamito shook his head silently.

"The events from the ball?"

"Yes, I remember that. You turned down the invitation from the crown prince of some country with the wave of a hand..."

"Uh, yeah."

"Around that time, Ren Ashbell invited me to dance –"

While massaging his aching temples, Kamito felt his memory gradually return in chronological order.

Something big must have happened.

No mistake about that. There was something of extreme importance –

"Ren Ashbell carved the «Brand of Darkness» on me, and then –"

Impatience burned in his chest.

Sparkling in the corner of his mind was an image of the radiant silver sword.

"And then, I –"

"Kamito, you rescued us from the hands of the « Institutional School» assassins!"

Looking at the upset Kamito, Claire spoke up.

"The «Institutional School» assassins?"

Kamito lifted his head abruptly.

That's right. At that time, I battled Muir's military spirit–

Claire's words prompted his memories of last night to return in a flood.

During the Blade Dance's opening ceremony last night, Muir Alenstarl, the «Instructional School» assassin calling herself Kamito's foster younger sister, had controlled a military spirit to attack Claire and company.

Marked by Ren Ashbell's «Brand of Darkness» and covered in wounds, Kamito raced towards the battlefield reluctantly, towards Muir Alenstarl's military spirit – but at that very moment, the curse of the mark took effect on Kamito's body, and he was overcome with blinding pain.

And then –

"...!"

The instant he regained his memory, Kamito's whole body stiffened, as if he'd been struck by lightning.

The image that sprung to mind was that of a girl – with mysterious violet eyes.

With beautiful silvery-white hair that reflected the moonlight.

With small hands that gently stroked his back.

And with lips that were cold as ice yet hot as fire when they touched his.

Then she turned into innumerable particles of light, which dissipated into a void—

That was the last Kamito saw of her.

"... Es... t?"

The name escaped from his lips in a trembling, spontaneous exhale.

It was the name of one who had always remained by his side, the name of an extremely important someone, the name of his contract spirit.

His slight memory disturbances earlier must have been because he had not wanted to face this fact.

"Kamito..."

Claire's low, worried words almost went unheard by Kamito.

"You must be joking... Est, why did she–"

Her meaningless words rang hollow.

His newly recovered memory insisted on replaying the last scene he saw before losing consciousness.

At that time, she had whispered in his ear:

Goodbye, Kamito –.

Blade spirit Est – with a head of silvery-white hair, just like a snow fairy.

His contract with her was originally a chance occurrence.

While maintaining a contract with a contract spirit from the past, the end result was an incomplete contract.

Originally, he could not even wield a tenth of the power with the contract. It must have been considerably painful for a powerful spirit like her.

However, Est had said that was all right.

To be able to contract with you, that alone is wonderful – she had said.

But I –

Three years ago, there was a day he had lost a previous contract spirit.

From that day onwards, he had vowed not to lose anyone important.

"Yet I – again!"

Est had disappeared.

She had sacrificed her very existence in order to save Kamito from being eroded by the curse of the brand.

"Damn –"

"Kamito!"

He threw up his hands in despair only for Claire to quickly catch hold of them.

She gazed steadily into his eyes, with the intent of calming him down.

"Est was not eliminated."

"Ah?"

"After all, your hands still bear signs of a spirit contract, right?"

Kamito's eyes widened.

"Y...es... indeed."

His right hand, the one in Claire's grasp, still bore a design of intersecting swords.

That was the proof of a spirit contract—the spirit seal.

If the contract spirit were to be eliminated, the spirit seal would then of course disappear.

The reason why Kamito had believed for all these three years that Restia had not vanished—the reason why he had retained a glimmer of hope—was entirely because the spirit seal inscribed on his left hand still remained.

The spirit seal connects the contractor to the contract spirit; it is a special «Gate».

Now the pain was too weak to be felt – but as long as the spirit seal on his right hand did not disappear, he would have proof that Est had not been completely eliminated.

"Est, she's still alive."

"Yes. And even if we cannot call her out now, there must be a way to do so."

If that's the case, I can't remain like this.

"... Ah ah ah ah ah!"

Biting back the pain coursing through his entire body, Kamito got up from the bed.

"Wait, wait a moment, what are you doing!? You still can't –"

"Est is waiting – I don't have the time to continue sleeping!"

Just as Claire's hands moved to stop him–

Gurgle gurgle ~

A lovely sound arose in the room.

"...Claire?"

All the strength had drained from his body.

"..... ~!Th-Th-This is a misunderstanding, t-there wasn't a strange sound just now!"

"You... don't tell me, you haven't had anything to eat since yesterday?"

"A-After all, you've been having a bad fever, well..."

Claire blushed and stammered.

"You can't afford to skip meals since tomorrow the battle begins."

"... I-I know. Speaking of which, you haven't eaten either."

"Well, I'm more or less accustomed to that..."

In his youth, Kamito had spent most of his time undergoing intense training at the «Instructional School».

The education he received there included even training to withstand starvation. Although he had no intention of attempting such a thing, he could now easily go without food for several days.

Then again...

Something suddenly occurred to Kamito.

Everyone now knows that I was from the «Instructional School»...

Precisely because they were important companions, he had not wanted them to know of his past.

Once they learnt of that, he thought that they would not want anything to do with him anymore.

It was only natural that one would think so.

On the contrary, they had treated Kamito –

"You... what you are or aren't accustomed to, that's entirely beside the point. If you don't eat well, you'll never regain your strength. Look, I even brought fruit here specially f-for you."

At this, Claire indicated the basket on the bedside table .

It was filled to the brim with delicious-looking ripe peaches.

"– Claire, thank you."

"Don't stand on courtesy, it's nothing. After all, they were brought back from the ball."

"No such thing!"

Kamito looked directly at Claire.

"Even after learning I was an orphan from the « Instructional School», you still stayed my friend, saying it didn't matter. ... About that, I'm still very glad."

"W-What, ah, well, that..."

Claire blushed and looked away.

"B-But of course, isn't that just how it is? Regardless of your past, you're my slave spirit now and that will not change!"

With a wry smile and a nod of his head, Kamito reached into the basket for a peach.

"Here, hand me a small knife, I'll cut it open."

"Leave it to me. You're the hurt one, get some rest."

"The peach is fragile, so it can be difficult to peel. I thought you weren't good at peeling fruits?"

"W-well, if you think that..."

Claire hid her face. Truth be told, it seemed that all the women at the institution, both young and adult, were all not that good at homemaking. It wasn't just Claire who was particularly bad at preparing fruits.

Kamito shrugged, picked up a knife from the table, and started peeling the peach in a repeated, circular motion.

Watching his deft handiwork, Claire asked emotionally:

"Did you learn this from that «Instructional School» too?"

"No, I picked up cooking and other skills during my travels. My travel companion was very picky when it came to the flavor!"

"...By companion, you mean that darkness spirit girl?"

"Yeah..."

While cutting the peach, Kamito's expression turned sour.

"Well – so it's like that..."

Claire looked doubtful.

"Look, it is peeled."

As if to change the subject, Kamito speared the peeled peach on a fork and presented it to Claire.

As she took a bite, some peach juice sprayed back at him.

"Yum yum~ so sweet, it's really delicious...!"

Her two red ponytails danced in joy.

Claire put her hands to her cheeks, an expression of sheer bliss on her face. She looked so lovely one could accidentally lose oneself in admiration.

"Well, now, have another..."

Kamito raised the fork holding the peach. Like a cat being teased, Claire's gaze followed it in a trance-like state.

"Look, here it is!"

He moved his hand away.

"Ah!"

And again.

"R-Really now!"

Claire's mouth opened and shut as she chased the peach doggedly.

Left, right. ... And again.

Finding it very interesting, Kamito intended to continue for a little longer –

"... ~Oi, w-why are you so cruel!"

Claire snarled, tears welling in her eyes.

"... Sorry, just felt like you were as adorable as a cat, so. "

"...?! W-what do you mean cute... s-stupid idiot, that's what you are!"

Into the mouth of the red-faced, frantically gesticulating Claire –

"Aah."

– went the peach.

And she bit down.

"Whew, ah, it's so delicious ..."

"Just like a cat."

Claire shot Kamito a look.

"Hey, isn't this situation backwards?"

"Hrm, backwards?"

"The injured person is you, but I'm the one eating."

"Well, it's a small matter, don't worry about it."

Kamito shrugged his shoulders, and conveniently put the peach into his own mouth.

The slightly tangy taste of the peach juice spread immediately in his mouth.

"Mmm, it really is delicious. It's thoroughly ripe!"

"I-isn't that the same fork..."

"... What's the matter?"

"N-No, it's nothing –"

Claire hastily took her eyes off him.

"Anyway –"

Kamito put the fork aside and asked.

"Yes, what?"

"What's the performance for the «Blade Dance»? The divination of the Queens have already been revealed, right?"

While Kamito was unconscious, the five Queens had held a ceremony at the great temple of the «Divine Ritual Institute», where the Five Elemental Lords bestowed their divine revelation. The performance was to be decided by this divine revelation – as for the competition format, it would be announced at a later date.

At this, Claire's expression grew serious.

"Mmhm, the blade dance performance to be presented will be – the «Tempest»."

"«Tempest», huh..."

That had been the competition format used for the Blade Dance not only in recent years, but also tens, and even hundreds of years ago.

The elementalists who will be presenting the blade dance performance will come together at the gathering place in the vast holy lands, and the teams will do battle

with each other over a number of days. Each individual's combat skills will be put to the test, but beyond that, of even greater significance will be their tactical and strategic ability, as well as teamwork and cooperation.

"... It will be a tough battle."

"Indeed. On the other hand, they clearly could have chosen a knockout-style tournament. If so, I suppose this was the best possible outcome."

Claire nodded with a serious look on her face.

The blade dance performance's format would be the « Tempest». This piece of information was one he had previously thought about.

With the only constraint being "five elementalists to a team", a little investigating on the history of the Blade Dance would have made it clear that the number of possible performance formats numbered only about ten or so.

As a matter of fact, the Areishia Spirit Academy had even conducted an extensive training exercise under the assumption that this performance would be selected.

However, one could still hold out hope, for as long as possible, that this performance would not be chosen – this way of thinking was still true.

More so than individual skill, this competition format emphasized a team's combined strength. One would be hard-pressed to say this system had any benefits for Claire, who was still worried and unconfident in regards to teamwork.

Furthermore, «TEAM•SCARLET» had only formed recently. The five members had begun working together a mere few weeks ago. While each of them was a strong elementalist in his or her own right, their combined team strength still could not compare to that of the other teams .

Furthermore...

Kamito's gaze turned to the spirit seal inscribed on his right hand.

All along, Kamito's overwhelming strength had always been unrivaled amongst his companions.

However, Kamito was now in a state lacking his contract spirits.

Despite previously being known as the strongest Blade Dancer, without his contract spirit, Kamito could not reach his full strength as an elementalist.

Following that, he rested his hand lightly on the chest wound that was still aching dully.

—The curse of this brand had yet to fade completely.

The «Brand of Darkness» Ren Ashbell had engraved was even now still eating away at his body.

Although Est had suppressed the worst of the damage by sacrificing herself, she had not entirely destroyed it.

"Est..."

Murmuring her name, even injecting into it divine power, the spirit seal yielded no response.

Instead, an intense scorching pain invaded his entire body.

"... Ah, damn it..."

"You'd better not act rashly. What you can do now is to get a good rest in order to regain your strength and divine power."

"... Ah, ah, I know."

Clenching his lips tightly, Kamito nodded and laid flat on the bed again.

Part 2

... Kamito seemed to be pretty depressed.

Outside Kamito's room, Claire let out a small sigh.

This was not unreasonable. After all, it was an elementalist who had lost their own contract spirit before his own eyes.

That bitterness, Claire understood all too well, as she too had lost Scarlet in the past. At that time, Claire had given up on herself, and had even allowed herself to be tempted by the dark spirit.

Of course, Est's eradication had left Claire somewhat shaken too.

For Est had not been just another contract spirit.

She was also an important companion of Claire's in the institution; for more than two months, they had fought side by side.

".....We need to quickly find a way to bring Est back."

The practical problem was that, without Est, «TEAM• SCARLET» had no chance of winning the battle royale. Kamito had incomparable strength, but an elementalist without a contract spirit at his side would not be able to do his best at a competition such as the «Blade Dance», where there were many tough opponents.

There must be a way to bring Est back – true, she had just said that, but what exactly one would need to do, she did not know. Assuming it was possible was fine and all, but they might not have enough time.

The Blade Dance battle would begin tomorrow; they could only afford to spare one day. If Kamito could not bring Est back in that time, they would have to rely on only the four remaining people to win the battle royale.

Although they did not intend on losing to the other teams, the fact of the matter was that their chances of victory against a strong opponent—such as, say, the Dracunia Dragons led by Leonora Lancaster—were slim indeed.

Moreover, in order to win the grand event, they would still have to take down Ren Ashbell, the most powerful of the Blade Dancers.

Then again, it was also possible for Kamito to look for another spirit to contract with.

But, all things considered, that was not likely...

Pacing around the portico, Claire shook her head. Leaving aside for the moment the issue of finding a suitable new contract spirit, Kamito would most certainly reject the idea of any other spirit but Est.

Speaking of whom –

Out of the blue, the image of that dark spirit girl inadvertently surfaced in Claire's mind.

Jet-black hair, billowing in the wind. A lovely girl with eyes the color of dusk.

In the end, I still did not ask Kamito about her...

A wave of pain rushed through her chest as she thought of it.

It was yesterday evening, in the courtyard of the castle : Kamito and the dark spirit girl, their lips locked in a kiss .

It wasn't that she lacked the opportunity to ask; it was just not a suitable time for such a matter. Shocked and upset over having lost Est, Kamito was not in a state for her to pursue the matter to completion.

But that girl; what on earth was her relationship with Kamito...?

The previous contract spirit was a girl of darkness who , even now, still held Kamito's heart.

The strange pain in her chest burned more and more intensely.

"W-Well, whatever, that rascal can get all kissy-kissy with whoever he wants to! It's got nothing to with me right?"

Claire reasoned this out with herself and then stopped outside the room.

She opened the door —

"...Huh !?"

There were three people in the room who rose from the couch in unison.

"Is Kamito awake!?"

Claire nodded her head in response to Ellis's query.

"Well, yeah, but it seems the fever has not receded yet. He should continue to rest."

".....Hmm, I see. All in all, it's good that he's doing alright."

"T-To actually have a girl worry so much over him. This guy still causes headaches like before!"

Rinslet crossed and uncrossed her fingers restlessly.

"... It was really all thanks to Est. My skills were simply ineffective against the curse of that brand."

In contrast with the other two, who seemed to have breathed sighs of relief, Fianna wore a somber expression .

Fianna was originally the second-best princess maiden overall in the «Divine Ritual Institute». Her power and skill at curse-breaking was comparable to that of the current princess maidens.

However, the «Brand of Darkness» inscribed by Ren Ashbell on Kamito's body contained a curse so strong that it left even Fianna helpless.

If at that time Est had not sacrificed herself, then —

Kamito's physicial body would have been utterly corroded by the curse. At worst, he might even have died .

"I have searched through a wide range of material but still couldn't find any information on this curse."

The pile of heavy books around Fianna was as high as a mountain.

She had brought these with her from the institution. They contained incantations and curses as well as documents related to spirits.

"But even now, I still cannot believe that..."

Ellis spoke while clenching her lips.

"That Ren Ashbell would go so far as to actually do such a thing —"

"... Yeah, I know."

Claire nodded.

The strongest Blade Dancer.

Her goal was to become a princess maiden elementalist, the most lauded person.

At the Blade Dance three years ago, her blade dance performance had mesmerized countless girls.

Whether it was Claire, Ellis, or anyone, they all held a powerful and honorable person like her in high respect. They had endured the Academy's numerous, strict training regimens in order to be an elementalist like her.

Which was why when Muir Alenstarl told them that it was she who had carved the «Brand of Darkness» onto Kamito's body, they completely could not bring themselves to believe it.

However, on further reflection—

Not a single one of them knew anything about who she was...

For example, what wish she made to the Elemental Lord as the victor of the Blade Dance three years prior.

Why, after reaching the highest possible level of renown, did she suddenly disappear without a trace from the eyes of the world.

And why, with things in their current state, would she want to make a return?

Speculation of all sorts were floating about, but it still remained a mystery.

Finally, why would the strongest active elementalist want to place a curse on Kamito.

The reason for that was unclear as well.

For preemptive reasons, so as to reduce Kamito to a certain amount of strength before the battle royale?

Even if that were so, there was no need to use such a circuitous strategy as a curse.

One would only need to fight with overwhelming brute strength to eliminate others, like what Muir Alenstarl did.

"Without conclusive evidence, that impostor elementalist may as well be the real Ren Ashbell."

"... But in that case, why not use her real identity?"

"Maybe there's some reason why she couldn't use her true identity," muttered Fiana.

"You think there is a hidden reason?"

"Ah... I-I didn't say anything!"

Addressing the frowning Claire, Fianna hurriedly shook her head.

"If there was someone masquerading as Ren Ashbell and using her name, I would never forgive her."

Placing her hands on the sword at her waist, Ellis spoke up.

"Come on, let's take the initiative to go ask her—"

"Impossible. We don't even know where she is in the first place."

Claire shook her head at Ellis's impulsive and dangerous proposal.

The team representing Ren Ashbell, Team Inferno of Alphas Theocracy, had apparently stayed in a tower outside the region where they waited for an opportunity to strike. No one knew where they were.

Moreover, Muir Alenstarl, who had vanished after yesterday's skirmish, had not given up on her plans to kill Claire and company. A slow, stealthy approach would be more practical than a direct dangerous one.

"Her intentions are indeed a major concern, but—the foremost problem here has to be Est."

Claire turned towards Fianna and asked,

"I'll get straight to the point. Est – can she still return?"

"That..."

Fianna stroked her chin, as though deep in thought.

"If Kamito's hand still shows signs of the spirit seal, it is evidence that Est has not been completely vanquished. Ordinarily, once she fully regains her power, she can return. It's just that –"

"Just that?"

"This is just my hypothesis – Est may have been trapped in a prison of the curse. Regarding this, I cannot be sure."

"What do you mean?"

"Est used her power to suppress the curse, but she did not completely break it. Now she might be held, shackled by the curse, unable to move."

"In order to rescue Est, we'll have to deal with the curse first, won't we?"

Ellis nodded with a serious expression.

"In regards to the «Brand of Darkness», I can get some help from the forces at the «Divine Ritual Institute». ... Next, there is the problem of Kamito himself. Although I don't think this will crush his spirits..."

"But, he seemed really upset....."

Even in front of Claire, he had put on a brave front so as not to let anyone see him weak. At the end of the day however, he could not hide how much the loss of Est had affected him.

By the looks of it, it should take him quite some time to get his act together.

"In that case.....is there anything we can do for him?"

Rinslet said.

"Truthfully speaking, it's not that we don't have an option..."

"Eh, really?" "What's is it?" "D-Don't leave us guessing! Tell us directly, please!"

Hearing this, Claire and the others who were not giving up, gathered in front of Fianna.

Fianna sighed and said:

"... Help our own opponents. While it is infuriating, we really have no choice."

She uttered this sentence of cryptic meaning –

And then informed them on what they - can - do - for - Kamito.

"...!"

The trio's faces instantly turned bright red.

"W-Wait a minute! That sort of thing – how could we possibly to do that!"

"R-Really now! Such a shameful thing... as a knight, I cannot accept it!"

"Keep in mind that I am the eldest daughter of the noble Laurenfrost family!"

The wave of protest from the girls came at the same time.

"Hmm – so you mean to say that you don't want Kamito to recover?"

Fianna sharply spoke and pointed at them.

"T-That is..."

"Of course that isn't true–"

"... I-I didn't mean it like that, except–"

The three blushed and stammered.

A mischievous smile formed on Fianna's face.

"All right then, it's settled. There are all sorts of ceremonial props in the luggage I brought. Help yourselves."

As she spoke, she reached into the travel bag and took out a myriad of colorful costumes and props.

Chapter 2: Triple Date

Part 1

Chirp chirp, tweet tweet... With their calls, the birds signaled the dawn of morning.

A warm ray of sunshine shone through the bedside windows into the room, rousing Kamito.

After talking to Claire this morning, he had returned to sleeping soundly once again, but it seemed that not too much time had passed.

Kamito had a fever not too long ago, but now it has almost completely faded away.

"Mmm... ah..."

He rubbed his bleary eyelids, moved around, and prepared to get out of bed.

At that moment –

"Aaah!"

"..."

His elbow suddenly touched something soft and gentle.

Also, wasn't there some sort of lovely sound just now...

Kamito blinked, puzzled by what it was, he turned his gaze toward the sound.

He saw a round mass of fluffy white fur, keeping him company beside him while he slept.

"... W-What is this?"

The unbelievable sight before his eyes startled Kamito.

However, he immediately thought of something...

Sneaking into my bed... the only one who would do such a thing is -

"Is it Est!?"

He hastily tossed aside the blanket.

"A-Ah! W-What in the world are you doing to me!?"

"... Huh?"

Kamito froze, speechless.

Hidden under the blanket was not the blade spirit who liked to dress in the nude with thigh-high socks.

What he saw was pure white fur, and a pair of long big ears that hung downwards.

And dazzling pale gold hair –

The lovely... Miss Bunny.

"... Hey, Rinslet! What do you think you're doing?"

"N-No, that's not right! I-I am Miss Bunny right now!"

Rinslet flushed red, embarrassed. The rabbit ear on her head twitched up.

"I said, Rinslet –"

"It's 'Miss Bunny'."

"Well, Miss Bunny."

Following her request, Kamito repeated obediently.

"This outfit of yours, what kind of act are you putting on?"

"This... I..."

In response, Rinslet could only rub both her kneecaps awkwardly while stuttering and unable to speak.

Seeing the usually stubborn and self-conscious Rinslet wearing such an expression gave Kamito an indescribable feeling of adoration.

... Speaking of which, this outfit is too provoking, isn't it? It's practically blinding!

A closer look would reveal that –

The Miss Bunny outfit Rinslet was wearing was at most being borderline immodest.

It was a set of very revealing erotic clothing, made of an undergarment-like material, with soft fluffy fur sewn on everywhere.

There was puffy fur on both her hands and feet, and a tail-like a ball of fur hanging from behind.

The greatest draw of the entire outfit however, had to be the the leather collar tied around her neck.

The elegant, aristocratic, wealthy princess wearing that collar... the combination was enough to give people wrong thoughts.

"I-I was turned into Miss Bunny by witchcraft... chuu!"

The maiden said it stiffly, as if reciting lines from a script.

"What's 'chuu'?"

"It's the cry of a rabbit."

"I can't imagine the cry of a rabbit sounding like that..."

Moving his gaze away from the huge twin peaks and valley right before his eyes, Kamito shook his head and spoke.

Right at this time -

"– K-Kamito, I've made breakfast for you!"

The door to the room suddenly opened.

The one standing there was the Captain of the Knights—Ellis.

"What!?"

Kamito fell speechless once again.

Ellis, who stood before him, was dressed like Rinslet in clothing that skirted the edge of modesty.

The only difference was that she wore dog ears instead of rabbit ones, and the fur on her hands were not white, but brown.

The ears atop her head swung constantly as she moved .

"E-Ellis... how is it that you too..."

"N-No, say no more!"

Red-faced and biting her lips, the embarrassed Ellis looked as if she wanted to find a hole to hide in.

"Oooh, i-if my elder sisters were to see me dressed like this, I don't know what they would say..."

Tears glowed from the corners of her brown eyes, probably because of how ashamed she felt.

... Now... what is the situation?

... What on earth had happened? Why would the pure-hearted and rule-abiding Captain be dressed in such a dissolute manner?

"J-Just don't mind my outfit, alright."

"Uh... how do you expect anyone to not mind that?"

Ellis ignored Kamito's confusing reply.

She cleared her throat with a cough, and pushed a small silver dining car in from the corridor.

"Ah?"

The aroma of freshly baked toast immediately filled the room.

"... Well, come have breakfast, I made these for you."

There was a meal of freshly prepared breakfast in the dining car; the steam above it had not yet dispersed.

The dishes included – toast grilled to the perfect degree, thick French-style pumpkin soup, deliciously tender omelets, Caesar salad with added tuna, and last but not least for dessert, there was yogurt topped with strawberry jam.

At first glance, although these were not exactly high-class, one could tell that every dish had been prepared with meticulous care.

"... You're such an expert! Did you do all these yourself , Ellis?"

"Y-Yes, I prepared these in the tower's kitchen. Only because I did not want to forget my culinary skills, it wasn't specially made for you!"

Ellis looked away, a look of embarrassment suddenly creeped across her face as she bent down beside Kamito.

"Captain, how can you do this!"

Disregarding Rinslet's protests, she addressed Kamito:

"I-I'll feed you... O-open your mouth, come."

"T-There's no need! I can do it myself –"

"Absolutely not, you're the one who's hurt after all."

"My wound has already fully healed –"

– Into his mouth.

Taking advantage of the moment Kamito's mouth was open, Ellis stuffed the omelette into his mouth.

"..."

"H-How is it?"

"... S-Super delicious!"

The omelette was not only just sweet enough, but it was also so soft and fluffy that it melted in his mouth. This beyond-perfect masterpiece by Ellis that confirmed the saying that the simpler the dish, the greater a test it was of the chef's skill.

"Is that really so! ... That's wonderful."

Ellis smiled shyly, the dog ears on her head moving up and down.

Seeing the usually serious and stern Captain wear such an expression, Kamito could not help but feel butterflies in his stomach.

"Hmph—Captain, you're too cunning to do this."

Rinslet puffed up her cheeks a little angrily and said.

"...Rinslet?"

"T-Then I shall give Kamito-san a massage."

Having said this, Rinslet immediately began kneading Kamito's shoulders with gentle strength.

"... What!?"

"How does it feel?"

"You're so good at this... my fatigue is slowly disappearing, wow."

Kamito was not just saying empty kind words of praise; Rinslet's massage technique was really of professional standard.

The comfortable sensation made all the tense muscles in his body relax one by one.

"You know, I give Carol massages all the time, because that child keeps praising me, I have unknowingly become very good at massaging."

"So that's why..."

... That a maid could get her master to knead her shoulders for her was, in a certain sense, almost too much.

"Uh huh, you'd better thank me well. I am the heir to the Laurenfrost clan. By right, I could never serve men in this way."

"W-Well..."

At this moment , Kamito suddenly felt two soft bumps against his back.

"But... only for today... everyone..."

Rinslet leant over and whispered into Kamito's ear:

"Everyone can become... Kamito-san's house pet."

"Uh... w-what did you just say – !"

In a panic, Kamito turned his head, then –

"M-Me too, just for today, I won't be your Captain!"

Then it was Ellis, who cried out, perking up her dog ears:

"I want to be K-Kamito's... little pet dog."

"Ellis!?"

What was the matter with the both of them?

"Kamito..." "Kamito-san..."

Their small animal tails swinging, the two of them stared at Kamito with fire in their eyes.

... Why is it that he felt dizzy with confusion? Could it be another fever?

Hey, something's not right...

The temperature in the room had started rising steadily.

Boom boom boom...

"... Y-You guys... what mischief are you up to?"

"Claire?!"

Kamito turned and looked –

The door, which had not been closed, opened with a slam. Standing there was Claire with a burning-hot whip in her hand.

Her shoulders were trembling slightly in anger, and her two bright red ponytails pointed upright like flames.

However, what fixated Kamito's gaze was how she was dressed.

Atop her head was a pair of shaking red cat ears.

On her slim petite body was erotic clothing made of red fur.

Her bare white thighs were displayed so boldly that one could not look directly at them.

"H-How is it that you too are doing this? That outfit is...!"

Kamito muttered, dumbfounded, then –

"Waaaah! S-Stupid fool, what are you looking at!"

Claire blushed and crossed her knees shyly.

She then made a sound like a cat's low growl, and glared at Kamito with tears in her eyes.

"Hmph, what... in any case you must feel that my chest is disappointingly small, isn't that right!?"

"..."

Truthfully speaking, that set of clothing did indeed make Claire's chest seem even tinier.

Although that very same attire could bring out the valley between the breasts of Ellis and Rinslet, the undeniable fact of the matter was, the sight of Claire wearing it only gave a person the impression of looking at a washboard.

Having said that, however, it did not reduce the charm she exuded. Her despondency over her chest size in fact made her look pitiful and delicate, which only increased her loveliness.

"Not at all. How should I say it... I think you're awfully cute like this."

Kamito expressed his honest feelings.

"A-A-Ah! W-what nonsense are you spouting!"

Claire's cheeks grew redder and redder. She waved the whip in her hand, which made slapping noises.

"Oooh..." "Kamito-san!"

At this, one of Ellis's dog ears and Rinslet's rabbit ears cocked in Kamito's direction, and they puffed their cheeks slightly resentfully.

"I-I don't care any more... you really are such a terrible fool!"

Claire muttered haltingly, then walked towards Kamito –

Then she abruptly jumped onto the bed Kamito was lying in.

"... Uhhh... hey... you guys...!"

The three pretty girls dressed as erotic cute animals pushed each other around the small bed, their bare shoulders pressed against Kamito's arm.

"Well then, you tell me... is there anything I can do for you, Kamito?"

Claire bit her lip lightly and looked at Kamito with upward-glancing eyes.

"Anything I... want you to do?"

"Such as... oh yes, sleeping on my lap ... or help you clean your ears... things of that sort?"

"Sleep on your lap?"

Such an action was a common dream among all men.

Kamito inadvertently glanced at Claire's soft-looking thighs – and then swiftly moved his gaze away.

"Oh, but only for today! You usually are my slave, but only for today... I-I am willing... to be your slave!"

"S-Slave?"

Kamito questioned her and Claire nodded.

"Y-Yes! For today, I will agree to anything you ask of me! Y-You better prepare yourself!"

"Wait a moment, what do I have to prepare myself for? "

"K-Kamito... it's the same for me!"

"And me!"

Ellis and Rinslet also squeezed up to him, snuggling Kamito tightly with their bodies.

"But... n-no sexual orders though."

"Who would ever do that! What kind of person do you guys think I am!?"

"Huh, you didn't want to make any such orders? Oh, okay..."

For some reason, a disappointed look crept across her face as she muttered those words.

Letting out a sigh, Kamito said frustratedly:

"– Now can you tell me why the three of you are dressed like this?"

He bluntly asked the trio.

"This... that is because..."

The three ladies looked at each other in panic.

After a while, Claire finally surrendered and said: " B-Because after Est disappeared, you looked so down and depressed –"

"... Huh?"

"So we decided to dress like this to lift your spirits...!"

Blushing furiously, Claire awkwardly finished her explanation.

It is said that when an elementalist is in a poor mental state, they will have no way of summoning spirits. In

more serious cases, they may sometimes even lose their princess maiden powers.

For example, Fianna had been dealt a severe emotional blow four years ago, and had been unable to use her power for a long period of time afterwards. When Scarlet was defeated by demon spirits, Claire had also fallen into grief, and suddenly found herself unable to summon Scarlet.

If the blow from the loss of Est caused Kamito's heart to be dominated by negative feelings of hatred, the «gate » between their hearts would truly close forever, never to open again. In truth, there were actually many princess maidens who had lost their status as elementalists because of such trauma to their souls.

So simply put, they wanted to cheer me up – roughly this kind of intention?

Evidently, he had made these ladies worry too much.

However, Kamito thanked them from the bottom of his heart for their thoughtfulness.

"... But why dress up as little animals and put on an act ?"

Kamito asked.

"It's Fianna who told us this secret. Y-You rascal, you like this kind of thing, don't you?"

"That goddamn princess, huh..."

Kamito gritted his teeth and muttered.

... So that was it, these sexual animal costumes were all from Fianna's secret collection.

"That... can't be right, you don't like this look?"

"Hmm? Well... I didn't say I disliked it."

Despite the many objections he felt, Kamito reluctantly admitted it -

Truth be told, he really thought it was quite cute.

Moreover, that these snobby aristocratic daughters would be willing to embarrass themselves so thoroughly in order to cheer him up – whether or not their methods were right, their positive intentions were enough to make one want to frankly thank them.

"... All of you, thank you."

"I-I did not do it for you, Kamito, I just want Est back quickly, that's all."

As Claire turned her head away, the cat ears on her head moved as well.

Ellis and Rinslet, too, shyly shook their tails.

"– N-Now then, shall we take a walk outside?"

Claire, who cleared her throat, tugged at Kamito's pajamas and asked.

"Outside?"

"Today is our last rest day before the start of the main competition, of course we should go outside and have a good time! Staying locked in a room depressed all day is hardly the solution, right?"

"... That is true."

All Kamito could do now was to believe in Est and await her return.

If Kamito, her contractor, did not get out of his depression, the «gate» would become impossible to open.

Going outside to lift his spirits was perhaps a good idea.

"And on this floating island, there is even a Biblion managed by the «Divine Ritual Institute»."

Rinslet added.

"Biblion?"

"It has been said that a lot of antique-level information is archived within the sacred Biblion, information that cannot be found even in our library of seals. If Est is really the sealed spirit sealed within the ancient sacred sword, we might be able to find clues in those documents ."

"... If that is so, it sounds like it would be worth a look. "

Anecdotes of the Demon King Killing Sacred Sword could be found across the continent, and although truth

and fiction were mixed in them, considering that Est was such a powerful spirit, it would not be surprising to find a mention of her in one of the ancient records.

"It is decided, now hurry up and get ready to go!"

"Mhmm, we can't be cheerful cooped up indoors all the time."

"And in a place so close to the port, there are many shops set up here too."

The three girls crowded together, all trying to take Kamito's arm.

"Wait, let me first change into my uniform... Also, you don't want to go out dressed like this either, right?"

"Aaah! O-Of course not!"

The girls blushed and quickly let go of Kamito.

Part 2

So –

Kamito and his friends, dressed in their uniforms, took a carriage ride to the port.

The sacred Biblion was apparently located not too far from here; plain and simple wooden structures were set up side-by-side in this area of the port, creating a lively atmosphere like that of a shopping street holding a celebration.

In addition, the various countries of the continent had also combined to raise funds for various food and entertainment facilities to welcome the spectators of the Blade Dance.

Because this was the original spirit world, which humans were forbidden to live in, this fantasy street would only appear for a few days.

It was a sight only visible during the Blade Dance.

"Wow – clear skies today."

"Mm, because we are on the clouds, of course."

Claire stretched like a cat as she walked, she and Kamito chatted while walking together.

Then, a cool refreshing breeze blew past, and Claire's tresses, tied into two ponytails, swayed in the wind.

Hanging distantly in the sky, the floating island — Ragna Ys — should have stood no chance against fierce winds, but because this sacred land had the additional protection of the Wind Elemental Lord, it was in no danger of being blown away.

Small flying crafts flew one by one between the gaps in the clouds and arrived at the port.

As the main event of the Blade Dance was about to begin, nobles from countries all over the continent had already begun to gather here.

"This really is spectacular."

"Only on the floating island can you see such a view."

Ellis and Rinslet expressed their amazement in muttered exclamations.

"... It would have been great if Fianna could have come with us."

While muttering, Kamito raised his head to the clear, vast blue sky.

At the moment, Fianna seemed to be searching for a way to destroy the «Brand of Darkness» imprinted on Kamito. She had been tirelessly visiting old acquaintances from her time at the «Divine Ritual Institute».

"Later, let's buy some gifts to take back for Fianna, alright?"

"Mmm, yeah."

The slate street was lined with a wide variety of shops.

As they were only temporary stalls, the materials they were made of were not particularly impressive. However , the craftsmen or chefs working inside were top talents who had been recruited from many countries. The Blade Dance was an excellent opportunity to showcase the nation's prestige so countries tend to generously spend huge sums of money on this.

The group walked to the heart of the shopping street, and passed a group of tourists who had just alighted from a flying craft.

"I didn't want to say this but this place really is terribly crowded."

"Men everywhere... I'm starting to feel dizzy."

Ellis and Rinslet looked around uneasily.

It seems that the ladies, having grown up in such a sheltered environment, were not used to such bustling places.

Furthermore, the city here was different from the college city: men accounted for a greater proportion of the people here. Although they were among the best elementalists, here they immediately turned back into pure innocent girls. Whenever a man, passing by quickly, brushed shoulders with them, they would let out small squeals and press themselves tightly against Kamito.

Claire was no exception, from the very start, she had repeatedly been sticking close to Kamito then immediately pulling away.

Whenever she leaned against Kamito, she would move away blushing; when she next bumped into a strange passer-by, she would go back to Kamito.

This foolish girl, what is she doing?

When Claire leaned into him again, Kamito quickly took her hand.

"Aaaah! W-What are you doing!"

The fiery cat maiden cried angrily, her face red.

"Who taught you how to walk so unsteadily? That's awfully dangerous."

"Well... o-okay, I'll let you hold my hand, but in here only."

As the two of them held hands, Claire turned her gaze aside shyly.

"You're too cunning..."

Rinslet puffed her cheeks unhappily, then grabbed Kamito's empty other hand.

"Rinslet?"

"I-I'm afraid of you getting lost, so hold on to me tight."

Then Ellis, too, joined in; seeing that both Kamito's hands were full, she had no choice but to latch onto his arm.

"E-Ellis...!"

"Hey... Captain! You're blocking the way here!"

"I-It's you, not me! Let go of Kamito's hand now!"

"Ah... all of you, I can't walk like this!"

The girls, all clinging to Kamito, began to quarrel.

They made such a scene that nearby passers-by started to whisper among themselves:

"Quick, look over there, three noble girls are serving that young man, wow." "That's because he's the rumored male elementalist, you know..."

"That's too wicked of him, to sink his fangs into those poor delicate girls." "But, take a look at those girls' expressions; they don't seem to hate him at all." "They must be under some kind of strange magic spell, of course."

Well... this situation seems to have gotten a little worse...

Kamito had long been used to hostility from strangers.

However, he did not wish to tarnish the reputations of the ladies he partnered with.

"I say... there are far too many people here, so why don't we find someplace cooler to rest?"

"Mm, that sounds good..."

Claire and the others nodded to show their agreement. It seems they were also thinking the same thing.

They looked around in search of a shop they could have a cup of tea at. And then –

"Kamito-san, look... there's a «La Parfait» shop over there!"

Rinslet pointed towards a chic-looking café across the road.

"Say, is that the famous «La Parfait»!? I've always wanted to try their cakes."

"If I remember correctly, this café is very popular throughout the empire... I-I'm kind of interested as well."

Even Claire and Ellis knew of it. Evidently, the business that had set up that temporary stall was very famous.

"... In that case, shall we go there?"

"Agreed!" "Yes!" "Mmhm...!"

The trio nodded in agreement and dragged Kamito towards it.

Part 3

The «La Parfait» stall was almost fully packed, so much so that the group had to wait a little before being served.

While sitting at the entrance waiting to be served, Kamito examined the stall's decor. The horizontal beams of the ceiling were naturally bent like tree branches, Kamito was very appreciative of the warm atmosphere this unique wood imparted.

"I'm surprised this is such a relaxing place. When I heard you say it was one of the empire's most popular shops, I expected it to be much more posh and luxurious. "

"This is only a temporary stall put up for the «Blade Dance», so of course it won't be so well-decorated. Their regular shops are so good aristocratic ladies would be willing to hide their identities just to patronize the shop incognito."

"Oh, so that's it... Hey, speaking of which, I'm not that loaded with cash..."

Kamito's face suddenly turned pale.

A shop even noble daughters would patronize incognito – this must certainly be a very high-class shop.

"If it were a regular shop, no matter how loaded you were, you'd still not be able to afford it."

"The stalls are free for the participants of the Blade Dance."

"I-I see..."

At Rinslet's words, Kamito let out a reassured sigh.

After a while, the four were led to their seats.

"I want a peach pie, a peach sorbet... and a peach mousse."

Claire flipped open the menu and gestured with her finger at the dessert options.

"Why are you getting so many peach options... haven't you already had some in the morning?

"N-None of your business... so what if I like them?"

"This raspberry-flavored cream puff also looks delicious."

"Y-Yes, that seems tasty."

"Oh... This dish puts some ice cream on a fresh hot apple pie to be eaten together..."

"Let's order one and divide it, everyone can have some . Kamito, what would you like?"

"Oooh... Well then, I'll have a scone, I guess..."

Kamito answered perfunctorily, but then –

"What's this attitude, you seem so reluctant."

"I really pity the dessert you order like that to eat."

"If you're a true man, you should pick decisively... Well, I'm talking about choosing cake."

For some unknown reason, Kamito found himself being severely berated by the ladies.

"S-Sorry..."

The three of them had always bickered when in training, but in these situations, they were always in full understanding.

Rinslet summoned a waitress, and one-by-one ordered those cakes and desserts with names that would accidentally make one bite their tongue.

"– And lastly, I'd like four cups of black tea from the Laurenfrost area."

"Yes."

"Ah... e-excuse me, wait a minute!"

Ellis called aloud to halt the waitress, who was preparing to leave.

"Yes?"

"Please add a little whipped cream and honey to my tea, and if you could, add some floating marshmallows as well."

"Uh... I'm sorry, esteemed guest, but our shop does not serve such a kind of drink."

"I-Is that so? Can you not make an excepti – oooh!"

Halfway through her sentence, Ellis stopped.

It was because Rinslet was pinching the back of her neck.

"Hey, what are you doing!"

"Oh my god, have you no shame! I don't like saying such things, but the Fahrengart family must really have no class!"

Rinslet was very particular about tea brewing, and so forbade Ellis from randomly adding ingredients as she wished.

"So what if you're from the Laurenfrost family, it's just a countryside noble family with more land, that's all!"

"Y-You wouldn't dare...!"

An intense mini-blizzard blew up beside Rinslet.

"N-No matter what, I don't care, if it's not sweet I won't drink it!"

"If that's so, why didn't you simply order cocoa just now?"

"Don't you think cocoa's a little too childish?"

"Only childish people would call cocoa childish!"

"Okay, okay, stop arguing, the cakes are here."

Claire lightly poked Rinslet's shoulder and said.

"Hmph... no matter, next time I'll teach our Captain how to drink tea."

"Sweet things are just nicer..."

Ellis said in a half-challenging manner through pursed lips.

Not long after, the dazzling array of desserts were delivered to their table.

Placed in silver containers, each of the cakes and breads looked like an exquisite art piece.

At the sight of them, the anger of the two aristocratic girls vanished and was replaced by expressions of joy.

"I can't help but feel that... to eat something so beautiful would almost be a waste."

"These snacks are made by the very best chefs representing our empire."

As Claire spoke, she opened her mouth wide and took a bite out of the peach pie.

"Waaah... it really is delicious!"

"This raspberry cream puff also tastes extraordinarily refined and delicious."

"Mmmm, there's probably some sweet wine added to this sponge cake... I must try that next time."

Kamito listened to the girls' comments, then put his own cake into his mouth.

"Oh, it's delicious."

Although he was no food connoisseur, the sweet taste in his mouth did give him a rich and noble feeling.

But, compared to this –

Looking at the joyous expressions on the girls' faces made Kamito feel inexplicably happier himself.

"Kamito, what is it?"

"Huh? Oh..."

Kamito was jolted out of his daze, only to find Claire suspiciously staring at him. He quickly averted his gaze and feigned ignorance.

"To think that this stall will be dismantled immediately after the Blade Dance, what a pity!"

"That's just how it is. But... there's a shop in the empire , so we will definitely have a chance to visit again."

"Mmm, next time we go, we must be sure to take Fianna... and Est."

Kamito looked down at the spirit seal on his right hand and murmured.

"Kamito ..."

"Kamito-san..."

At this, Ellis and Rinslet raised their heads.

"—Est will return, I promise."

Claire spoke in a calm but confident tone of voice.

"So... just trust in her and wait for her to return. The only person who can help her out in this way is her elementalist – you."

"... Mmmm, you're right."

Kamito nodded – and then mused:

... Partners will make one stronger – that probably refers to this feeling I'm having now.

Three years ago, the strongest blade dancers were indeed very swift and strong.

Solely in terms of skill as an elementalist, he was unrivaled.

But these physical powers were fragile and would easily be crushed by a strong blow; they were strengths developed through loneliness.

The Kamito in the past had no one to rely on.

After losing Restia, he was left only with eternal despair.

Now, however, I have friends willing to support me.

So my heart will no longer shatter.

I will not sink into despair again.

... Thus far, Est has saved me many times.

Kamito clenched his fist on the table.

– So, it's my turn now. No doubt about it: I will save you.

Part 4

The most important Sanctuary in the entirety of the floating island Ragna Ys—the Grand Hall of the Wind Elemental Lord—was located atop a hilly area. It was some distance away from the building where the blade dance participants were.

This white building was made from a combination of the best-quality materials and cutting-edge technology. The huge construction covered the whole of the hill; one could appreciate its majesty even from outside of the floating island.

It was not only the place where the wind spirits listened to the spirit king's decrees to the holy land, but also where princess maidens from the «Divine Ritual Institute» chosen by the various nations would practice their devotions. Therefore, even the nobility of the country would absolutely not be allowed to enter.

However, at that very moment time, there was a lady outside the gate shouting anxiously:

"Please do me a favor! Grant me an audience with Reicha-sama–!"

She was individually seperated from the team of five in order to work separately from Kamito – Fianna.

Wearing a rare serious look, she pleaded with the guard standing at the gate.

"You really don't give up do you."

The middle-aged guard regarded Fianna with unfriendly eyes.

Her face clearly expressed her stubbornness.

"Please withdraw. Our «Divine Ritual Institute»'s gate will never open simply for any one, let alone getting an audience with Reicha-sama. Your requests will absolutely never be granted."

The guard uttered a statement she had probably repeated many times before.

... This is so infuriating! These people are as stubborn as ever!

Fianna cursed impatiently to herself.

Having said that, she had in fact expected such a reaction from the start, because the person she wanted to see was not someone who would meet with just anybody .

If I could borrow her strength, it would certainly be enough to break the curse on Kamito. But...

The guard looked down at Fianna, not bothering to conceal her expression of contempt.

Evidently, she had not the slightest inclination to open the door.

... Well, I did know the reason ages ago.

Refusing to give up, Fianna bit down on her lip.

The one she was thinking of was the Annihilation Spirit princess that had betrayed the Fire Elemental Lord – Rubia Elstein.

There had been high hopes placed on Fianna to be successor, but the incident with Rubia had left indelible horrors in her heart, causing her to lose the power of summoning contract spirits, and with that, her status as princess maiden.

And so Fianna Ray Ordesia became a lost princess maiden, thoroughly disappointing the people who had had great expectations of her and discrediting the « Divine Ritual Institute».

... You narrow-minded people, who only know how to put in superficial effort, really disgust me.

Even her own parents—The Areishia emperor and empress—and the various nobility were all no different.

When Fianna was still the princess maiden successor, these people had flattered her in every possible way. Once she had lost her contract spirit powers however, they immediately scorned and disdained her, changing their attitudes faster than one could turn the page of a book.

Of course, not all of them were like that. It was just that the «Divine Ritual Institute» organization had decayed under the weight of its long history, and so indeed had a darker side.

Seeing Fianna's stubborn refusal to leave, the guard shook her head and said:

"I do not wish to continue wasting my time on you."

Having said this, she turned and went back into the temple.

"Wait a minute—"

Fianna quickly moved to catch up with her, but—

"Aaaah!?"

Suddenly, a fierce wind rose and blew Fianna off her feet.

Fianna and Claire were different in that they had not received special combat training for elementalists. Too late to protect herself, she fell heavily to the ground.

"... What!?"

She saw something stand at the doors – a magical wind spirit that looked like a winged lion.

It was a Guardian Spirit; it made contracts with not elementalists, but buildings. This very building, was in fact—the true sanctuary.

"It appears impossible to break through the front gate.. ."

Fianna glared at the Guardian while nursing a scrape on her lip.

Part 5

A sword fell in mysterious darkness.

This shining, beautiful sword, swallowed by a sludge-like nothingness, was gradually losing its light.

– How strange. What on earth is happening to me?

Nonetheless, this sword apparently still retained its self-awareness.

Although the disappearance of her physical body had affected her, damaging her memory –

Her memory of that last event was crystal-clear.

She remembered his warmth as she embraced him with both hands on his back.

And, for just the briefest instant, the touch of their lips against each other.

Then – a harsh voice calling out her own name.

...K-Kamito!

Her radiance all lost, the sword slowly sank in the bottomless darkness –

Chapter 3: Dragonia's Allurement

Part 1

After leaving the cafe, Kamito and the others took a stroll near the port.

Surrounded by the three lovely ladies, Kamito still received quite a few stares from passers-by that made him feel uncomfortable, but since they were some distance away from the centre of the shopping street, the situation was much better.

"Can we take a look in that store?"

Rinslet's outstretched hand was pointing at a stall that specialized in selling aristocratic dresses.

"No problem." "Yeah, I don't mind."

Claire and Ellis nodded in agreement.

"Rinslet, are you buying clothes now?"

Kamito asked, puzzled. As the Blade Dance would begin tomorrow, she would not have many opportunities to wear anything else other than her uniform.

"I'm not buying them for myself; I'm getting them for Carol and my little sister."

"Your sister?"

"Yes, my sister specially came to watch me show off my talents."

Rinslet fluffed her long hair happily.

At that moment, the maid Carol had arrived at the port ready to greet the girl Rinslet was talking about.

"Oh, turns out Rinslet has a little sister too... I imagine she must look just like her older sister; she must be a beautiful, pleasant child."

"K-Kamito-san, w-what nonsense are you spouting..."

At Kamito's casual thoughtless chatter, Rinslet blushed , embarrassed.

"M-My sisters are very good-looking as well!"

"My sister Velsaria is a beauty too!"

"Uh... why are you guys suddenly saying all these..."

Claire and Ellis felt an inexplicable sense of competitiveness.

"Well, I'll wait patiently outside. Call me when you're done."

As Kamito turned to leave, Claire tugged on his sleeve to stop him.

"You have to come in with me."

"... Why? This shop only sells girls' clothing, doesn't it?"

"I-It doesn't matter... we have to stay together."

"Well... Hey...!"

Kamito was forcibly pulled into the shop by his sleeve.

The shop was unexpectedly spacious. In addition to fashionable clothing, it also sold items like underwear.

"Well then, let me first pick out something for my sister."

Rinslet happily disappeared into the shop.

"Kamito, wait here for me... I'll go try something on."

"Try something on?"

"... U-Uh, I mean, so you can help me make a decision."

Claire's cheeks flushed.

... Oh, I get it.

Kamito was struck by a sudden understanding, and could not hold back a smile.

Having grown up in a sheltered aristocratic family, Claire was probably not used to choosing her own clothing.

... Nonetheless, it's hardly a good idea to ask me for advice.

"I'd be glad to help... but I take no responsibility!"

"It doesn't matter, I just want your thoughts."

Claire lifted her two ponytails proudly, smiled sweetly and said:

"I want you to admire me after my gorgeous makeover ."

"I look forward to it... But, with so amazing a model, I'm sure any clothes you pick would look good."

"... S-Stupid! You're talking nonsense again!"

Claire flushed at Kamito's teasing and left with her face red.

Part 2

At the instant Claire left Kamito's side –

... Good opportunity!

At a corner of the shop, Ellis was silently shouting to herself.

Now all the hindering people were out of the way.

Of course, as a Knight, Ellis prided herself on her honesty and nobility.

Normally, she would never take such actions behind the backs of the other two.

However, some things were too important to concede.

Now is the perfect time!

Ellis firmly pursed her lovely lips.

Upon further reflection, ever since arriving on this floating island, she had always been half a beat slower than the other two.

The outfit she wore to purify herself in the lake was the plain competition swimwear, the evening gown she so painstakingly prepared was no match for Claire's superior beauty, and even just now, she had been slower than Claire and Rinslet to hold Kamito's hand, and had to settle for his arm.

I-I absolutely must find some way to improve my position right now...

Ellis secretly shot a look towards Kamito's side profile.

It was a face she was very used to seeing; nevertheless, it set butterflies aflutter in her stomach.

To think that at first she held prejudices against him just because he was a male elementalist.

She had thought he would destroy the strict discipline of the Academy, and that he was an enemy of hers.

However, things had changed.

Kamito... I –

A new emotion budded in the heart of this young girl, who had previously known only of a strict education.

She still could not figure out what this unknown feeling was.

Nonetheless –

Kamito, I would love to find out more about you...

Ellis stroked the ribbon her sister—Velsaria—had given her.

She felt doing that would help her muster her courage.

Suppressing her rapidly throbbing heart, Ellis took a step forward.

Part 3

A tug.

"Huh?"

Feeling a pull on his sleeve, Kamito turned his head and saw –

Ellis, who was red-faced, had her hand on the sleeve of Kamito's uniform.

"Ellis... what is it?"

"That... c-come with me!"

"...?"

Tugging at Kamito's cuffs, Ellis pulled him into a small room partitioned off by curtains.

It turned out to be a dressing room with a huge mirror.

"W-What are you doing!?"

"K-Keep it down! Do you want to be blasted into crabmeat butter croquettes?!"

Ellis unsheathed her sword with a hiss, leaving Kamito with no choice but to raise both his hands and nod in submission.

"... But, why are you bringing me into a dressing room ?"

"Uh, uh, actually... i-it's because I want you to comment on the clothing I try on."

"Comment on clothing?"

"Right. It's a rare opportunity, so I'd also like to buy some clothes. It's just that... I'm ashamed to say I don't exactly know much about girls' dresses."

... Oh, so she wants me to give her some advice?

Something isn't right. Claire and Rinslet are both here, so why pick me?

"If it's girls' outfits you need help with, I think it's better you ask the shopkeepers."

"... Oooh, I-I just want to know what you like!"

"Oh... so that's what it is..."

At Ellis's ferocious glare, Kamito could not help but take a few steps back in fear.

"...Well, all right, what clothing would you like to try on, Ellis?"

"Ah... uh, right now I'm torn between these two pieces –"

Ellis coughed loudly –

Then took out two different articles of clothing and presented them to Kamito.

"Oh, so it's a choice between black and white..."

The cloth before him was dotted with intricate lace flowers.

The fabric was smooth and gave off a sense of quality. It should probably be silk? The upper edge was also lined with lovely lotus leaf decorations –

"... Hey, isn't this underwear!"

Kamito spat, repelled.

No mistake about it, what Ellis was holding was indeed a set of high-class underwear.

"Well, answer quickly... w-which one do you like!"

Ellis herself seemed embarrassed; as she asked her question, her face flushed bright red.

"Y-You want me to choose..."

Kamito swallowed.

Ellis's face bore an extremely serious expression. She did not look like she was joking in the slightest, but was genuinely wanting Kamito's advice.

On the one hand was pure and lovely white.

On the other was mature, sophisticated black.

Ellis is a high-spirited, brave and heroic Knight Captain... common wisdom would say to pick white, I guess.

... No, precisely because of this, reverse thinking might be better.

For an honest and pure girl like Ellis, if she wore mature and womanly black underwear... the contradiction would certainly be arousing.

"Kamito, h-hurry up and decide, please! This is really embarrassing."

"Oooh, I know..."

Kamito nodded hastily and made his decision:

"... I would choose the black, I think the mature black underwear suits you well."

"Y-Yes, really... On days where the difference between winning and losing is critical, I'll often wear black underwear."

Ellis nodded, apparently satisfied.

Say, that time he had accidentally peeked in on the girls changing clothes at the Sylphid Knights' general meeting , Ellis had also been wearing black underwear... which means to say there had been some important game that day?

"T-Then I'll get this, next I just need to make sure it's the right size."

"Mmm, then... I'll leave first –"

Kamito sighed in relief and started to move out of the dressing room. Then –

"Oh no... that rascal Kamito, where on earth has he gone now? I clearly told him to wait here!"

Kamito suddenly heard Claire huff.

Surprised, Kamito quickly shut the dressing room curtain he had just half-opened.

... This is terrible!

If Claire found him and Ellis nestled in the dressing room together, he would certainly be burned to a crisp.

Kamito quickly turned to tell Ellis about Claire being right outside –

"E-Ellis... what are you doing!?"

Kamito could not help but stare, wide-eyed and tongue-tied.

In the blink of an eye, Ellis had already taken off her uniform and put on the set of underwear.

"Aaaaaa –"

"... Wow!"

Seeing Ellis on the verge of shrieking, Kamito quickly covered her mouth with his hand.

"Mmmm..."

He used his momentum to push Ellis's whole body against the wall, then whispered in her ear:

"Don't make a sound... Claire's nearby."

"...!?"

Ellis's eyes widened in surprise.

"... Kamito? Where on earth has he run off to?"

Claire was searching everywhere; by the sound of her voice, she was very close.

Even the slightest movement would give them away.

The duo huddled against the wall, barely daring to even breathe.

"..."

"..."

A little sigh of relief escaped from between Kamito's fingers over Ellis's mouth.

Through her underwear, he could feel the softness of her huge bosom. Kamito felt as if his furiously beating heart was loud enough to be heard.

E-Ellis's chest was really something...

Her tender breasts wobbled and changed shape as his arm pressed against them.

For some unknown reason, moist ripples were swimming in Ellis's pair of brown eyes as well.

... Like this, they passed tens of seconds, that felt like forever.

Claire had probably gone somewhere else, since her voice could finally no longer be heard.

"...Whew."

It appears the crisis had been averted. A weight lifted from Kamito's shoulders, and he caught his breath.

"K-Kamito... you...!"

Ellis quickly moved away from Kamito, and sharply glared at him.

"W-Why did you suddenly do that!"

"... I'm sorry, it was an urgent situation, I'm so sorry."

While apologizing profusely, Kamito turned away from the underwear-clad Ellis.

"Uhm... Never mind, in any case it was I who asked you to help me pick underwear in the first place."

Ellis softly cleared her throat, shyly lifted her eyes in Kamito's direction and said:

"Oh – Oh yes..."

"What is it now?"

"Do you think t-this underwear really... looks good on me?"

Ellis rubbed her attractive and alluring thighs against each other while shyly asking.

"Ah, I think it looks good. How should I say it... I feel excited when I look at it."

"R-Really...!"

At Kamito's candid answer, Ellis's lips curved upwards in a happy smile.

"Excellent... Then at the critical moment, I will be sure to wear it."

"... Critical moment? Oh, you mean the competition that starts tomorrow."

"I hate you... That's not at all what I meant!"

As if she wanted to be purposely difficult, Ellis pinched Kamito's arm.

... That Ellis could actually say something like "I hate you" was adorable.

Part 4

After departing the dressing room, Kamito, feigning as if nothing much had happened, tapped Claire's shoulder and said.

"– Claire, sorry to have kept you waiting."

"Y-You rascal, where did you go! I was looking for you everywhere!"

"Sorry, I went outside the shop for a second... Oh, the dress you're wearing is very cute."

"Huh... R-Really? You really think it's very cute?"

A puff of hot air emerged from the top of Claire's head , and her two ponytails bobbed up and down.

She was wearing a white dress of a more mature style, that was also cut very low in the front.

Truthfully speaking, the chest area of the dress looked a bit collapsed, but Kamito intentionally neglected to mention this point. Additionally, leaving aside the issue of whether or not the dress was suitable, Claire was as lovely as ever.

"Hmph... Well, never mind. From now on, I forbid you to come and go anytime you wish. You're to stay by your master's side, got it?"

"All right, I get it."

It seemed like he had successfully managed to appease the Hell Cat maiden.

Fortunate to have avoided being burnt to a crisp, Kamito let out a sigh of relief.

"Ho ho, looks like you bought something revealing by accident."

"W-What's the matter with me, why would I go so far as to buy such provocative underwear..."

As the other two waited at the front of the stall, Rinslet finished shopping for her sister and Ellis bought her underwear. The task completed, they headed towards the Biblion, a short walk away from the port.

Situated on a slightly raised plot of high land, it looked like a huge citadel from the outside.

Like the tower where Kamito and the others were settled at, this building had also been repaired through ancient relic restoration.

In terms of sheer size, the Biblion could not compare to the library of seals, the pride of the Areishia Spirit Academy, but it was home to many ancient rare collections and even legendary forbidden books.

Such a place was one where they were likely to find a way to destroy the «Brand of Darkness» eroding Kamito, or even a clue as to how to bring back the disappeared Est.

As Kamito and the others entered the building, the sight that greeted them was that of innumerable bookshelves, each as high as the ceiling.

"This library sure is huge..."

"We'll take charge of researching the «Brand of Darkness». Kamito, go look for clues on Est – there should be quite a bit of information here about legends of the Demon Slaying Sacred Sword."

"Oh, okay."

Kamito nodded to show his agreement, then walked to the bookshelf that held records of legends from all across the continent.

On his way there, low murmurs of the «Divine Ritual Institute»'s princess maidens whispering to each other floated into his ear.

"Quick, look, it's the male elementalist." "He's the pervert we've heard rumors about?" "Careful, don't look at his eyes, you'll be defiled!"

W-Why do even the princess maidens in the Sanctuary know of those rumors about me?

Kamito sighed heavily and began searching for documents about the Sacred Sword.

Part 5

Meanwhile, Claire and the others, led by the librarian, had entered the sealed archives located underground.

After all, the curse Kamito bore was one even Fianna—once the second-best princess maiden of the « Divine Ritual Institute»—could not destroy.

As such, it would be a waste of time to simply browse literature on general spirit magic. Therefore, after some thought, the girls decided to instead focus their research on the forbidden books in the sealed archives.

The forbidden books covered quite a diverse range of content; for example, some held confidential information on the curse-bearing seal—a technique many countries had now banned the research of.

"Given the nature of that curse, it might be something similar to the curse-bearing seal."

"That is a possibility... Furthermore, there are also signs that Ren Ashbell's Alphas Theocracy is secretly conducting research on the curse-bearing seal –"

"While we're at it, it might be better if we investigated the Alphas Theocracy as well."

One by one, Claire and the others began flipping through the forbidden books displayed on the shelves.

Although they were all aristocratic daughters from distinguished families, just their princess maiden status alone would not get them access to these forbidden books.

All of them could have access to these books only because of their particular situation—they were participants in the Blade Dance.

"Records of the punitive expedition of S-rank spirits in a deep sleep in the spirit forest... nope."

"Data on the curse-bearing seal collected during the time of the Blue Baltic War... Oh, this one might contain a clue."

"... Ancient Taboo Magic... This book should be useful—Ahhh!?"

While looking through the collections, Ellis let out a shriek of shock.

"Ellis, did you find a clue!?"

"What's happened to you? Why is your face so red?"

"N-Nothing! It's nothing at all –"

"...?"

Claire stole a glance at the book was Ellis holding open .

Then –

"Ah ah ah! W-What is this!"

Claire blushed hotly as well.

The picture on the book was a portrait of a princess maiden in a very indecent position.

The taboo ritual magic—this book's content was so explicitly realistic that even Claire, who had a soft spot for provocative romance novels, could not help but take three steps backwards.

"N-Nasty... this is simply too obscene!"

"Captain, you pervert!"

"N-No! I was looking for books about rituals and accidentally took this one, that's all!"

From the way Ellis was hurriedly shaking her head in denial, one could tell this noble Knight girl had been quite shocked.

"..." "..." "..."

They were silent for a while.

Looking at the taboo book before them, the girls swallowed nervously.

"I say... w-why don't we flip through it briefly and take a look?"

Claire proposed a suggestion, a note of slight hesitation in her voice.

"... T-That could be good, there might be something useful in there, you never know."

"Y-Yes... one can't deny there is such a possibility –"

Rinslet and Ellis both nodded, but averted their glances, not comfortable with looking at each other.

Claire nodded and psychologically prepared herself, then began flipping through the book with trembling fingers.

Then –

"... Wow!? W-What is this thing! I-I don't understand... "

"What's going on... b-blindfold him, and then do something like that... aaaah!"

"Is t-this... a man's... thing?"

"Put it i-in one's mouth... and... a-also lick it?"

"T-To go as far as to put that in between one's breasts... ewwww... h-how could one be willing to do such a thing! "

"..." "..." "..."

These girls were relatively innocent, and would be shy to merely hold hands with a boy of their own age.

The impact of peeping into the unknown world left them suddenly speechless.

The only sound to be heard was the flipping of pages, echoing in the silent sealed archives.

In all honesty, all three of them thoroughly enjoyed what they saw.

Part 6

While Claire and the others were getting excited in the underground archives –

"... Whew... when I finish reading these, I will have died of exhaustion."

Kamito moved the heap of documents onto the table and began his investigation on the legends of the Sacred Sword.

The Demon Slayer Sacred Sword—also known as the « Sacred Sword of Severian», was a highly prized sword of legend.

The source of this name came from the Sacred Queen—Areishia Idriss's legend.

She was the wielder of the «Sacred Sword», as well as the one who vanquished the demon king.

There was no one on this continent who did not know her name.

Surprisingly, however, most people knew only the name of Areishia Idriss, and not the truth of her exploits. Furthermore, future generations had embellished many of her legends, such that the truth was virtually impossible to know.

... All right, never mind, the great Sacred Queen isn't important.

His immediate priority right now was the «Sacred Sword» she wielded.

Only paying attention to phrases related to the «Sacred Sword», Kamito flipped through the document quickly.

A «Sacred Sword» able to vanquish the Demon King was definitely no ordinary weapon.

The most likely argument was—the Sacred Sword had in truth been created from high-level spirits.

After eliminating the Demon King, the Queen Areishia had apparently sealed the contract spirit that had fought alongside her all the way in one of the swords inside the castle of the devil king.

The sword used to seal the spirit, the sword that she had relied on to do all this, was the «Sacred Sword of Severian».

As for the reason why Areishia would want to seal her own contract spirit inside the sword—no one knew. Similarly, there was much speculation as to her whereabouts after she eliminated the Demon King, but no conclusive answer.

Kamito closed the book, speechless..

The conclusion is... we still cannot say anything for certain; what is unknown is still unknown.

Although they had accessed a wide range of documents, virtually all of them contained only hearsay with no basis in fact.

As for the spirit forest that Est had originally been sealed in, he could not find anything more detailed than what was already in the library of seals.

– Having said that, however, Kamito had not had high hopes in the first place.

However many similar documents I look at, there is no way to bring Est back.

Moreover, whether or not Est was the real Demon Slaying Sacred Sword did not matter. To Kamito, she was his important partner, a point that would not change regardless of anything.

"Est..."

Kamito gently stroked the spirit seal on his right hand.

Est, with dazzlingly beautiful silver-white hair, virgin milky white skin, and a face that usually held no expression, until Kamito stroked her head; she would then narrow her eyes in a smile to show her pleasure.

... Est will surely come back to me.

To believe in her wholeheartedly and await her return – that was all Kamito could do for her now.

Kamito got back to his feet, picked up the pile of documents with both his hands and prepared to return them to the shelves..

Just as he finished putting all the books back to their original display positions –

"– You are Kazehaya Kamito?"

Kamito turned in the direction of the sudden call.

"Oh my god!"

The young lady before him was one he had met before.

The reason for Kamito's inadvertent shocked scream was because he really did not want to bump into such a person.

"What the – is that a greeting you thought up yourself? Kazehaya Kamito?"

The girl frowned unhappily.

With thick bright shoulder-length black hair, she had an icy kind of beauty.

The girl was wearing a beret inlaid with the crest of a flying dragon, as well as a black military uniform that gave her a majestic aura and suited her very well.

She was also staring coldly at Kamito, through her glasses, with a strong and forceful gaze.

She was a contestant from Dracunia, Leader of the Knights of the Dragon Emperor – Leonora Lancaster.

In this Blade Dance, she was among the more promising elementalists and favorites to win the tournament.

However, she was also a dangerous girl who was seeking to physically deal with Kamito's lower half.

"Y-You fool, what are you doing here?"

"What a stupid question. Obviously, I'm gathering intelligence on other countries' teams."

Leonora pushed at her spectacles with her middle finger, gave Kamito an exasperated look and replied.

So that was it... Indeed, there were some documents in her hands. Despite possessing power few other players could rival, she still put in the effort to find out about her competitors – she truly was a formidable opponent.

Kamito then raised a question about another thing he had realized:

"You didn't wear glasses before, did you?"

"... You really are a worse pervert than the rumors say, if even such subtle changes cannot escape your notice."

"Uh... is this a subtle change?"

... If it were a change of hairstyle, he might not notice, but glasses were rather difficult to overlook.

"I only wear them to read. My eyesight is actually quite poor. I use spirit magic during the blade dance to strengthen my vision."

The Dragon Knight maiden stared at Kamito coldly, and continued:

"Say it directly if you wish... say I don't look good in glasses."

"Ah...? Not at all, I think the look suits you, I think it's very cute."

"W-What nonsense are you saying! You pervert with a glasses fetish!"

"What now..."

The sudden and inexplicable scolding left Kamito squinting and mumbling in confusion.

Leonora cleared her throat and replied with a question of her own:

"And you, why are you coming to a place like this?"

"... Ah, uh, because I wanted to investigate some things ."

It would be a disaster if his competitors came to know about him losing Est.

Kamito gave a vague answer hoping to evade the topic , but –

Leonora suddenly turned her gaze towards the shelf Kamito had returned his books to.

"So, the thing you're investigating has to do with your contract spirit?"

"... Ah!?"

Surprised, Kamito instinctively struck a combat pose to fend off an enemy.

"... Even you guys know about it?"

"Are you referring to – your blade spirit's disappearance?"

"..."

Leonora's frosty gaze seemed to pierce right through Kamito.

"Sorry, I took the liberty to spectate the battle between you and the military spirits."

"... So that's how."

Apparently, she had seen the full course of the battle between the crowd and Muir Alenstarl.

At that time, in order to prevent anyone from becoming aware of the battle outside, Ren Ashbell had laid down a large-scale Isolation Barrier around the tower, but it had not deceived an elementalist as powerful as Leonora.

"So you just silently watched Claire and the others get hurt?"

"Did I have an obligation to enter combat to rescue them?"

"This..."

Kamito forcibly swallowed nasty words of accusation.

She did indeed have a point. By no means was she obliged to extend a helping hand to a rival team's elementalists.

"You are too naive. The «Blade Dance» is no friendly contest, it is a symbolic war with matters of national prestige and prosperity at stake."

Her line of reasoning was quite correct.

The victorious country of the Blade Dance would receive all manner of blessings from the Elemental Lord – the influence of this was large, and could even affect the fortunes of the entire country.

Furthermore, the Dracunia Knights were surely not the only ones who had watched the skirmish on the side.

"In any case, I'm sure you guys loved watching us beat each other bloody."

She was not to blame – although Kamito understood this in his heart, he could not keep the harsh words from escaping his mouth.

"No... in fact, regarding the disappearance of your blade spirit, I'm also very sorry."

Shaking her head, Leonora spoke up unexpectedly.

"I could feel that spirit had strength to equal my Dragon Slayer Sacred Sword – as a knight, I had very much hoped to do battle with you at your peak condition ."

Looking at her sincere expression, Kamito's response was –

"Leonora, you're mistaken."

"Mistaken?"

"Est has not really disappeared. Also... her real strength is far more than you know."

"... Oh, if that's so, I'm sorry."

Leonora smiled and nodded in understanding.

It was perhaps an illusion, but in that moment, her pupils seemed to change color.

"I don't intend to go easy on you, though. As the saying goes in our country— «The dragons of Dracunia will go all out to take down even hunting lions» —I will do everything in my power to defeat you."

"That's fine... show me what you got."

Kamito replied indifferently, but sighed bitterly to himself:

This girl really is a rival...

Leonora Lancaster possessed solid power, and could stand up to the strongest elementalist in the Academy – Velsaria.

The «Nidhogg» she summoned was a dragon spirit that could, in a single blow, instantly vaporize the military spirit that attacked the flying ship. The extent of its power was hard to comprehend.

However, that was not where the true power of this dragon girl lay.

Although she also had overwhelming strength, it did not make her arrogant. She was not complacent or careless even against weaker opponents – this

impeccable temperament was her most threatening weapon.

With things in their current state, with Est lost, they really could not fight her.

"Well, if you insist –"

All of a sudden, Leonora abruptly pushed Kamito against the bookshelf.

"... You!?"

Kamito just barely stopped himself from shouting.

A pair of upwardly curving eyes regarded Kamito from beneath glasses.

The faintly sweet smell of shampoo tickled Kamito's nose.

"... W-What do you want!?"

"Wasn't it you who just said 'show me what you've got '? Kazehaya Kamito."

Leonora held her index finger to Kamito's lips, and stepped even closer to him.

Her perfectly bouncy breasts pressed tightly against Kamito's arm.

... This... this one's chest really is unexpectedly big!

She probably dressed to cover her figure, like Ellis.

... I'm so stupid, this isn't the time to have such nonsense thoughts!

Although the two of them were hidden by bookshelves, there were several princess maidens nearby . If they were caught, they would surely be sent to the Divine Ritual Institute's council for this delinquency.

"Your heart's beating faster, is my body getting you excited?"

"D-Doesn't that go without saying? To be held so tightly by s-such a cute girl as you –"

"... C-Cute? Me?"

The dragon girl stared with wide eyes in surprise.

"That's the first time... any man's said something like that to me..."

"A-Anyway, let me go!"

"How will that do."

"... What do you mean?"

"As I just said, «The dragons of Dracunia will go all out to take down even hunting lions». After seeing your battle against Muir Alenstarl last night, our country's military personnel made an emergency decision to change our strategy against you.

"Strategy against me?"

"Which is to chop off your thing before you sink your evil clutches into any of your princess maiden Knight teammates."

"That's your state policy!?"

Kamito could not help but roar.

Dracunia... that country was more terrible than he had even imagined.

"But our military also came to another conclusion – as you are the only male elementalist in the world, it would be a terrible pity to have such an outstanding bloodline end just like that."

"... Oh, I think I understand what you mean."

Kamito said under his breath, rolling his eyes.

In simple terms, they were currently in a situation commonly known as the Beauty Trap.

"Obediently grovel at my feet – Kazehaya Kamito."

Leonora was whispering sweet words that turned one's head numb.

T-This girl, she really has completely changed from last time ...!

Previously, Kamito only had to accidentally brush against her chest for this Dragon Knight maiden to faint; she had originally been more innocent than even the Academy girls.

Even if it was because she had been ordered to do so, how did she manage to tempt Kamito like this?

The girl before him – seemed to be an entirely different person.

"Hey, are you even..."

At that moment, Kamito suddenly realized –

Leonora's originally black pupils now had a smoky red coat, as if burnt by a flame.

... What's going on?

Just when Kamito was frowning in thought –

"You really are a stubborn man who refuses to obediently submit, contrary to what the rumors say..."

Leonora picked the skirt of her uniform up by both sides, and slowly lifted it upwards.

"... What!?"

At this, Kamito's heart involuntarily started to throb.

Accompanied by the sound of cloth friction, her skirt approached even closer to the edge of modesty.

For some unknown reason, although it had already long passed the warning line – her panties were nowhere to be seen.

"Hey... y-you're going to expose your panties!"

"You needn't worry, as servants of the dragon, we Dracunia princess maidens... don't have the habit of wearing panties."

"How is that nothing to worry about!"

Indeed, he had heard of elementalist princess maidens choosing not to wear underwear to enhance their connection with their spirits.

"Abandon resistance, then proclaim your eternal loyalty to my country."

"P-Please stop...!"

In pace with the rubbing sounds of fabric, in only a second, her skirt would be completely lifted. Then –

"Y-You two! Wh-Wh-Wh-What unspeakable things are you doing!"

"...!?"

Gogogogogo...!

It was none other than –

Claire, her shoulders quivering and her two red ponytails bristling in anger.

"D-Disgusting... that you would think to do something so immoral and depraved in the sacred Biblion..."

"We left you alone for just a moment, and you take the opportunity to do such a thing!"

Ellis and Rinslet were also glaring at Kamito furiously.

"N-No, it's not what you think! It's..."

"Disturbed by hindering nuisances..."

With a sigh, Leonora swiftly separated herself from Kamito.

"... Leonora?"

Kamito looked at her, puzzled, and realized something –

Sometime ago, the burnt smoky red glaze on her pupils had disappeared, to be replaced by the original black.

Additionally, the look on Leonora's face suggested that the something possessing her had just disappeared.

"I'm very sorry, just now the «Dragon Blood» in my body seemed to have awaken carelessly."

"«Dragon Blood»?"

This strange word left Kamito puzzled.

However, Claire's alert ears twitched.

"– Then... We'll continue some other time. The next time we meet will probably be on the battlefield."

Leonora turned and quickly marched, military-style, from the scene.

"..."

Kamito watched her image move increasingly further away.

"... Go on, speak... You rascal, what were you doing with that woman?"

Claire questioned Kamito coldly.

"I bumped into her accidentally, and we just shared some idle chat about the main event tomorrow... I swear."

"... Ooh, is that so? Forget it."

"Have you found out anything about Est?"

"No, there was nothing useful... what about you, any findings?"

Kamito returned the question, then –

The three ladies blushed tomato-red.

"W-We found nothing!"

"Right! A-And also, we definitely didn't peek at any taboo magic books, oh!"

"T-That is...!"

"...?"

At their distraught reactions, Kamito frowned in confusion.

Part 7

It was sunset by the time the group left the Biblion.

On the return carriage, Kamito asked Claire:

"Hey, remember the «Dragon Blood» Leonora talked about just now? What is that?"

"... About that, I've only ever heard rumors."

Resting her cheeks on her hands, Claire mused:

"That's a specific kind of constitution... It's said that people with «Dragon Blood» will very rarely be born as

princess maidens in service of the dragon. Legend has it that when the «Dragon Blood» awakens in the princess maiden's body, she will become one with the «dragon»."

"Become one with the «dragon»?"

What on earth did those words mean? It was difficult to understand.

However, what he could say for sure was that – Leonora had obviously become a completely different person just now.

To think that such a noble Dragon Knight would actually become like that...

Recalling the touch of her soft breasts set Kamito's stomach aflutter.

"Hey... Kamito, you aren't thinking nonsense, are you? "

"N-No, I'm not... just thinking that Leonora is quite the formidable opponent, that's all –"

"R-Really, yeah, if it were that girl's chest... she should be able to put it in between!"

"Between? Between what?"

"O-Or, you could say... unless you mean, your measurements are so large that even that girl would not be able to fit it...?"

"... What?"

Confused, Kamito looked towards Ellis and Rinslet, sitting opposite, and for some unknown reason, they were both red-faced with embarrassment.

Oh well, never mind...

Kamito lowered his body slowly onto the carriage seat.

Gazing out the window at the scenery, he noted the sun setting gradually into the hills.

The main competition of the Blade Dance, the war, would commence tomorrow.

It would be a long day, full of arduous Blade Dance presentation.

Today was the last day he would have so much leisure time to enjoy with his teammates.

At this thought, Kamito inadvertently reached out a hand to touch her – his partner sword, usually always hanging at his waist.

"..."

However, his hand met only emptiness.

He could feel not even the slightest pain from the spirit seal on his right hand.

Part 8

The sword, luster all lost, fell for what felt like eternity through an endless darkness.

She was not dormant, yet not conscious, only silent and still.

Whether to call this feeling peace or torture varied from person to person, but truth be told, these additional definitions were meaningless – stillness was stillness.

The sword sank in the pitch-blackness; it was a world with nothing bar darkness.

Kamito...

Her power almost all lost, all the blade spirit could do was to call his name.

Kamito... I am your sword, so –

The spirit whispered, and at that moment –

Out of the darkness suddenly shot a dazzling light.

The figure that appeared in the light was – a naked, pale-skinned, silvery-white-haired maiden.

She looked just like Est in human form.

– Who are you?

The sword asked the girl before her.

I am the consciousness of the one... previously known as the «Demon Slayer Sacred Sword».

The silvery-white-haired girl answered, her expression blank.

You... are me?

Yes. You are me – whereas I, am you complete.

At her answer, Est finally understood the true identity of the girl.

You are my «body»... right?

Yes, I am your higher physical presence.

The girl nodded, expressionless.

She was the highest-level blade spirit with overwhelming power – the real Demon Slayer Sacred Sword.

When Est had made an incomplete spirit contract with Kamito, she had split into two individuals.

Perhaps it was because Est had lost her power and was on the verge of disappearing that the loop joining the two of them could once again reconnect.

I cannot stay for much longer.

The girl who looked exactly like Est gently stretched out her right hand to her –

And commanded in a cold expressionless voice:

I command you to immediately destroy the contract with Kazehaya Kamito, and come back to me.

For her, this was a request there was no denying to.

After all, Est's contract with Kamito was in the first place an informal, happenstance event.

Because the Demon Slayer Sacred Sword had not originally intended to make any contracts with elementalists.

Even she herself did not know why she had let herself become the contract spirit to that boy.

These conflicting emotions split to form «Terminus Est » – this was the origin of the other Est.

However, now that the contract «gate» between Est and Kazehaya Kamito was closed, she could take advantage of this time to fuse back the missing piece « Terminus Est».

Unexpectedly –

... I-I refuse.

The sword—Est—turned down the outstretched hand of the Sacred Sword maiden.

The sword cut through the surrounding darkness, and pointed its tip towards the girl's throat.

– You refuse?

I do not... I do not want to break my contract with Kamito...

You are merely a part of me, yet you want to defy my wishes ?

I am the sword of Kamito, not something of yours.

Est expressed her desire to refuse clearly to the maiden .

– I understand, it seems... that elementalist has germinated in you the seed of self-awareness.

Again expressionless, the girl said quietly.

Her silvery white hair, which exuded a faint light in the dark, whipped up violently.

But I do have to tell you, Est... you—or I should say, I—do not have the right to become the sword of any person.

... I don't understand what you mean?

Because my existence itself is a kind of sin.

– Sin?

The sword could not understand the meaning in the girl's words because, in the moment that she contracted with Kamito, she lost most of the memories she had in common with her original body.

The present Est was left with a handful of incomplete past memory fragments.

As well as the memory of the short period of time spent with Kamito and the others.

Recall it, the sins that you – and I – must bear.

The silvery-white-haired girl gently touched the tip of the sword.

In an instant, memories flowed like a fierce torrent into Est's mind –

Recall it, the events with the very first person to contract with me... Areishia Idriss.

Chapter 4: Laurenfrost Sisters

Part 1

Kamito and the others returned to the tower just before the sun had fully sunk past the horizon.

As with yesterday, there was a ball in the great hall of the tower. This one had nothing to do with the commencement ceremony, however; it was simply an activity organized for the aristocrats, so there were virtually no elementalists participating. As they were to do battle in the main tournament event the very next day , they were simply not in the mood to go to something as frivolous as a ball.

Kamito returned to his own room and gathered the things he would take with him tomorrow.

The items he put into the bag included some easy-to-carry food and a lantern made of spirit crystals, and other necessities for survival in the forest.

As the rules of the game limited the weight of things he could bring with him, the items had to be carefully selected

"The individual fight three years ago was much easier than this..."

At that time, Kamito only had to concern himself with beating the opponent immediately in front of him.

However, this time, he would have to make plans to ensure the survival of all his group members.

Because alone, Kamito was no match for Ren Ashbell.

No... as things were right now, without Est, he probably did not have enough power to beat even Leonora Lancaster and the other elementalist teams.

"... I must not become a burden to the others."

Kamito muttered to himself. Then –

From outside the room came sounds made by lovely girls.

"Wow, so beautiful! My sister's hair is really pretty!"

"Ah ah... Mireille, don't pull my hair!"

... That was Rinslet's voice.

"What is it?"

Kamito opened the door and walked to the hallway –

And saw a little girl playfully tugging at Rinslet's hair.

"..... Rinslet, what're you doing?"

"Ah... Kamito-san!?"

At the sound, Rinslet turned her head in surprise.

"Kamito?"

The little girl playing with her hair turned to face Kamito too.

Just like Rinslet, the little girl also had a head of gorgeous pale gold hair.

The white dress she was wearing contrasted very nicely with her clear emerald-green eyes.

The little girl looked to be about seven or eight. While she was still young, she looked extremely cute, and somewhat alike to Rinslet.

"Oh wow, it's Kamito onii-chan! Look, I see Kamito-chan!"

Grinning widely, the girl took big strides towards Kamito –

And, with a bump, buried her head in Kamito's tummy.

"Ahhh... what!?"

Stunned, Kamito could not respond, but Rinslet hastily ran over, saying:

"Mireille, you cannot do that! You are a lady of the Laurenfrost family, how can you display such thoroughly indecent behavior! "

"It doesn't matter, Kamito-chan will soon be Mireille's brother-in-law anyway."

"... What?"

Upon hearing the girl's words, Kamito could not help but frown in puzzlement.

"M-M-Mireille! W-W-W-What rubbish are you saying!"

"Huh? Doesn't sister always write in her letters to me... ooo, ooo..."

Rinslet quickly put her hand over the girl's mouth.

Kamito scratched his head and said:

"... Uh, this kid... is Rinslet's younger sister?"

"That's right. My name is Mireille Laurenfrost, and I am the third daughter of the Laurenfrost family."

Breaking free of Rinslet's grasp, the girl curtsied to Kamito like a perfect aristocrat.

Her lively emerald-green eyes danced cutely.

When she grew up, she would surely be a noble beauty, just like Rinslet.

"I am Kazehaya Kamito, teammate of Rinslet –"

"I know, little pet dog of your teammate and my elder sister, right?"

Mireille smiled sweetly and said.

"L-Little pet dog, what the hell?"

"M-Mireille! Stop talking nonsense!"

Rinslet quickly hushed her, but Mireille simply wore an innocent look and continued:

"Huh, that's not right? Then, is it... boyfriend?"

"O-Of course not! H-H-How can he be... b-boyfriend..."

The elder of the two sisters clapped her hands to her cheeks, her face so red that she looked about to go up in smoke.

"Oooh... elder sister is embarrassed now, how cute!"

"... Hmph, I h-hate you, stop speaking nonsense to bully me!"

Rinslet gently patted Mireille on the back.

Looking at the two of them, Kamito could not hold back a smile.

... Silly Rinslet, losing all dominance before her little sister.

While this scene was indeed hilarious, to be mistaken for Kamito's lover or girlfriend was certainly not very nice for Rinslet.

Kamito gently placed his hand on Mireille's head.

"Ai!"

Mireille squealed as if she was being tickled.

"I am neither Rinslet's pet dog, nor her boyfriend. You shouldn't vex your sister like that."

"... Oh... uh-huh. Kamito-kun, I'm sorry."

Blushing slightly, Mireille nodded.

It seemed that, like her sister, she was a naturally honest and good child.

"Oooh... you didn't have to deny it so thoroughly..."

For some unknown reason, Rinslet pursed her lips and bore a slightly unhappy expression.

Then –

"It can't be Kamito-san, the one who captured all three of us young ladies with your sweet talk..."

"Carol!? When did you come –"

The maid, who had appeared out of nowhere, smiled and chuckled.

At Carol's words, Rinslet stared at Kamito in astonishment and said:

"K-Kamito-san... n-no, I will not have a threesome with my sister!"

"Rinslet... Are you thinking of rude indecent things?"

Rinslet took a step forward and reached out as if to protect her sister, while Kamito rolled his eyes at her.

"I-I think, if I'm together with my big sister... I don't mind doing anything at all."

This little sister was really something, to say such odd things.

Carol cleared her throat, pinched the back of Mireille's neck and said:

"All right, Mireille-san... your elder sister has things to do, so let's be good and go back to our room."

"Oooh... but I still want to play more with Kamito-kun."

Seeing that Mireille was about to defiantly shake her head in refusal, Carol whispered in her ear:

"Be good, you mustn't disrupt your sister's private time!"

"Oh... t-true. I see, Carol."

Mireille abruptly stopped her fuss and grasped Rinslet's arm tightly.

"Sister, I'll be cheering you on tomorrow, you must save Judia and bring her back!"

Her innocent, smiling expression suddenly turned very serious.

Opposite her, Rinslet also nodded with a look of firm determination.

"I know, leave it to me."

Mireille gently released her sister's arm, broke out into her original smile, and turned towards Kamito.

"Kamito-kun, after the Blade Dance ends, you must come visit our Laurenfrost area."

"Mmm, I know."

"If Kamito-kun could really be my brother-in-law, that would be so great..."

"Huh?"

With those words, which left Kamito shaken, Mireille –

Exited from the other end of the hallway, accompanied by Carol.

"I h-hate her... taking care of this little sister really gives me a headache..."

"But Rinslet is an elder sister who really knows how to take care of people."

"B-But of course, I am after all the eldest sister of the house."

Rinslet rumpled her long hair, a little embarrassed.

Kamito suddenly grew curious about the name Mireille had mentioned in passing.

"Oh yes, who was that Judia person you two were talking about just now?"

"..."

A dark cloud passed over Rinslet's face.

"S-Sorry... did I just ask a question I shouldn't have?"

"N-No, not at all!"

Lowering her gaze, and shaking her head, Rinslet said:

"Judia is my other sister, the second Laurenfrost daughter."

"So you have another sister."

"Mmm. She's now in the Laurenfrost castle, in a long unwakeable sleep."

Tearfully, Rinslet told the whole story to Kamito.

The second daughter of the Laurenfrost family, Judia Laurenfrost, was originally a highly ranked, excellent princess maiden of the «Divine Ritual Institute». However, just a few years ago, while performing a sacrificial ritual towards the Water Elemental Lord, she made a mistake. In a fury, the Elemental Lord imprisoned her in a curse of never-melting ice.

The Earl of Laurenfrost had recruited elementalists from all over the empire in an attempt to break the curse, but to no avail. Despite possessing the power of a variety of high-level spirits, they could not break the curse.

After that, Judia had lain unmoving, dormant in a deep sleep..

"... a curse of the Water Elemental Lord? That must be something no human elementalist can break."

"Yes, there remains only one way to save Judia."

Clenching her fists, Rinslet continued: "That is the reward of the Blade Dance victors – the Elemental Lord's blessing. My «wish» will be for the Water Elemental Lord to have mercy and bestow his forgiveness, to let me save Judia."

"Rinslet..."

Her words rekindled a fire in Kamito's mind.

Yes, it's not just me...

Claire, Ellis, Fianna... and Rinslet as well. His partners in the «Blade Dance» all had a strong unshakeable motivation.

The disappearance of Est, right before his very eyes, had dampened Kamito's spirits and made him a little more withdrawn.

However, he could not afford such excuses.

Resting both his hands on Rinslet's shoulders, Kamito told her:

"Rinslet, we absolutely must achieve the final victory."

"Y-Yes, you're right!"

Rinslet blushed and smiled happily.

Probably because she usually preferred to wear a stubborn, haughty look, Kamito felt that this candidly smiling Rinslet looked immensely adorable.

"Well, Kamito-san... I'll head back to my room and get ready."

"Sure."

Rinslet shyly turned and dashed towards the other end of the corridor.

"... Well then, I too will continue my preparations."

Kamito shrugged his shoulders and started back towards his room. Then –

"Hee hee... Kamito, you're just as popular as ever."

"Fianna!?"

Fianna was standing at Kamito's door, and appeared to have been there for quite a while.

"How was it? Had a good date with Claire and the rest ?"

The second royal princess smiled and teased Kamito.

"... Date? Not at all, that was just –"

Midway through his sentence, Kamito stopped, not knowing how best to continue.

From an objective point of view, it did indeed look like a date... maybe.

Furthermore, it looked like an outing of a frivolous womanizer with three pure, untarnished beauties.

At Kamito's reaction, Fianna sighed, dumbfounded, and said:

"Ah... I see Kamito now is not just a devil at night, but a devil in the daytime as well."

"... Devil in the daytime, what's that?"

"Never mind, it was I who got you guys to go out and have fun... from now on it'll be my turn to show you my moves."

"... Your turn, your moves? What do you mean?"

Kamito tilted his head, not understanding.

Fianna suddenly looked serious.

"I found an acquaintance who can break the curse on you."

"Really!?"

While Kamito and the others were touring the streets, Fianna had been searching for people who could destroy the «Brand of Darkness».

"... Fianna, thank you very much."

"You're welcome ... However, there still remains one problem."

"A problem?"

"As she is a high-ranked princess maiden, I cannot simply ask her to leave the Grand Shrine, so meeting with her will be a bit difficult. Thus, I will need you to come with me personally, Kamito."

"... Oh, so that's it? Of course I can go with you."

"Wonderful. So, without further ado, can I please ask you to hurry and change your clothes?"

"Change my clothes?"

"Yes, I recall that Kamito... you seem to be very good at dressing up as a girl?"

Part 2

– A few minutes later.

Before the mirror in the room stood a dark-haired girl.

"..."

"... This is too surprising, I never expected it to be so accurate."

"You rascal, don't tell me you're actually pleased..."

"N-No such thing, it's just our only solution."

Fianna gazed into the distance, trying to brush over the issue.

She's definitely enjoying this...

Kamito muttered testily.

Indeed, the reflected girl in the mirror was Kamito, wearing the ceremonial outfit of the «Divine Ritual Institute».

There was a black wig on his head and makeup powder on his face.

With even a layer of pale cherry-colored lipstick on his lips, he looked the very picture of a young maiden.

"What a beauty... Although your outline is a little different, such beauty is unmistakable... You truly look like the former Ren Ashbell. If you walked the streets looking like this, you will certainly be the subject of much talk."

"H-Hey... could you keep it down –"

Kamito instinctively looked around.

Although they were indoors, there was no guarantee; the walls had ears.

Upon seeing Kamito's embarrassed countenance, Fianna smiled sweetly and said:

"However this outfit really is a masterpiece. It's so pretty I want to call everyone over to feast their eyes on it ."

"... Please don't!"

Kamito desperately pleaded with Fianna, as if begging for his life.

"Oh... careful, with such loud cries, you'll be heard by people in the corridor."

Suddenly, just at that moment –

From the other side of the door came the sound of something dropping on the floor.

"...!?"

Kamito turned in the direction of the sound –

"Ka-Ka-Kamito!? W-what in hell are you doing!?"

It was Claire, an expression of shock and horror on her face. Scattered on the floor were things that had fallen from her hands.

"C-Claire!? Y-You're mistaken, it's not what you think – ah!"

Kamito rushed forward, wanting to explain himself.

However, in his haste, he tripped over the hem of the garment and fell, and the chest pad fell out of his chest and tumbled to the floor

... Everyone was silent for several seconds.

"Uh... Well, this..."

Breaking the silence, Claire opened her mouth and said:

"N-No, it doesn't matter... I don't mind! O-Only... I was just surprised to suddenly find out that you have such a hobby. U-Uh... everyone has their own hobbies, after all!"

"That's what I'm saying, you're mistaken!"

Kamito drew himself upright and explained loudly, but Claire played the fool and pretended not to hear.

"Y-You don't have to hide, it's all right! That... you look very appropriate in that, and I think you look pretty dressed as a girl. Although this hobby is something you probably don't want to make public, I support you, Kamito; I'm rooting for you, yeah!"

"I don't need your support!"

"Ha ha... Kamito, that's fantastic."

Fianna laughed, watching the duo.

"Fianna... I beg you, help me explain this to Claire, please."

"Well, I have no choice... I would have liked to see more of this good show."

"... What do you mean?"

Claire gave her a puzzled look.

"It's a long story... Kamito and I are about to sneak into the Grand Shrine, to ask a high-ranked princess maiden to destroy the «Brand of Darkness» on his body.

"You mean... the Grand Shrine?"

At this, Claire's jaw dropped in shock.

That was a perfectly understandable reaction. The Grand Shrine was after all the most holy area of the entire floating island, not accessible to even Blade Dance participants.

"W-What do you intend to do there! Don't you know that there are very powerful guardian spirits keeping watch over the place?"

"Obviously I don't plan to storm the front gates! We will enter through a secret passageway; therefore, I need Kamito to take on the appearance of a princess maiden."

"But... t-this is too dangerous..!"

"Then, you tell me, is there any other way to rid Kamito of the curse?"

"T-That..."

Seeing Claire at a loss for words, Kamito gently placed a hand on her head.

"Ah! ... W-What are you doing!"

"Don't worry, I won't be as clumsy as to get caught."

"..."

In response, Claire bit her lip nervously –

"Well, all right... I know..."

She nodded reluctantly.

"However, in that case, I have to come along too."

"That won't do. The fewer people sneaking in, the better. And Claire, your hair color simply stands out too much."

"Claire, are you worrying about me?"

"Stupid! O-Of course not."

"Rest assured, I will return Kamito safely to you in one piece."

"... Oooh... I w-wasn't even thinking anything of the sort!"

"Ha ha... Well then, I'll leave you to mind the house. Kamito, let's go."

Fianna waved goodbye to the furiously blushing Claire, who then –

Rushed over.

She pressed her soft chest to Kamito's arm.

"Hey hey! Fianna!?"

Butterflies in his stomach, Kamito blushed.

"Oooh... S-So what... Kamito you idiot!"

Claire rushed out of the room in tears.

Part 3

In this part of the floating island, Ragna Ys, was a chain of vast underground caves.

No one alive today knew when it had been constructed, or even for what purpose.

There was a figure standing at this place where even the highest ranked princess maidens were ordered to stop.

She was the girl in the bright red mask – Ren Ashbell.

She was in an area carved into a square space.

A stark contrast to the natural caves surrounding it, this room had obviously been built by man.

The small stone room was in fact the sacred True Sanctuary.

The Grand Shrine erected aboveground was merely there to provide a majestic appearance.

There was a rotting smell wafting about the place.

The masked girl was staring at the black sarcophagus placed in the middle of the room.

The mere presence of the sarcophagus gave its surroundings a sinister and ominous air.

"– I have searched for you for a long time, Ren Ashbell. "

Out of the blue came the childish voice of a young maiden.

A gray-haired girl slowly walked out of the darkness.

She was Muir Alenstarl.

She, who had been missing since the battle last night, was the second-ranked «beast» in the Instructional School.

"It seems that the fourth person is finally here. Lily is fetching her here now."

"Is that so? That princess really brings trouble to other people."

The one they were talking about was the fourth member of Team Inferno – Sjora Kahn. She and Lily were different from Muir in that they had not been picked by Ren Ashbell's own people, but were elementalists appointed on recommendation by the religious Alphas Theocracy.

The Alphas Theocracy had not provided Ren Ashbell with any information on Sjora's abilities, because Sjora's other responsibility was to monitor all of Ren Ashbell's actions.

"Muir Alenstarl... You looked for me only to talk to me about this?"

"Of course not. Let me ask you... you fiend, what have you done to my brother?"

Muir asked severely, as if a knife had been stabbed into her neck.

"You are dissatisfied with how I unleashed his full power?"

"It should be Muir's responsibility to awaken my own brother."

"It was not my intention to deny you that, but because of other reasons, I had no choice but to speed up the initial plan."

Ren Ashbell shrugged her shoulders, seemingly without any second thoughts.

"And if my brother's body cannot bear it, what do you intend to do then?"

"If so, it will mean that he does not have the right to be the one to succeed the Demon King – that's all."

"What are you saying...!"

At this, Muir's expression turned sharp and murderous.

"You can't accept that? Then next time... wake him using your own hands."

After saying that, Ren Ashbell tossed Muir a small, delicate ring.

"... And this is?"

"I got this «Mythical Class» ancient artifact from the old fogeys at Alphas. The three military spirits sealed within are all weapons that were scrapped by the international guidelines."

"Do you think Muir will be so easily bribed by this toy of yours?"

"This is merely a token of our good friendship; please accept it."

"... Hmph, I'll just watch and see how long you can endure this."

While putting on the ring, Muir glared angrily at her.

"Although Muir is helping you for now, I am not like Lily. If you dare lay a hand on my brother again, I will kill you without mercy."

"Whatever... Go ahead, if you can."

Ren Ashbell easily shrugged off Muir's ferocious glare, then –

Turned again towards the black sarcophagus.

"Speaking of which... What are you doing here?"

"A resurrection ritual."

"... Huh? What's that?"

"Bringing spirits of the dead back to the living world – the Institutional School regards this as the most forbidden act of all."

"Bringing spirits of the dead...?"

Ren Ashbell was placing a chain of jewels on the sarcophagus.

That was the «Blood Stone» – found only in the original spirit world, such a highly prized spirit crystal contained power that ordinary spirit crystals could not possibly rival.

Next, in a clear bright voice, she started singing a chant that sounded like a curse.

"O Nether World Elemental Lord, I humbly beg you to call back the souls of the seeds of darkness – "

From behind the mask came some hard-to-understand spirit language.

If there had been princess maidens from the Institute there, they would certainly be very surprised.

For only the highest ranked princess maidens were permitted to sing the High Ancient language.

Bump, bump – from the black sarcophagus came sounds like a heartbeat.

Suddenly, the bright red «Blood Stone» shattered!

Then –

Sizzle... Hiss... Sizzle

With tiny movements, the lid of the sarcophagus slowly opened, and from the resulting small crack – emerged something!

"W-What on earth... is this...?"

Muir Alenstarl could not help but flinch at the repellent, horrifying sight before her eyes.

"He is the previous Ren Ashbell – Nepenthes Lore."

Ren Ashbell's voice echoed brightly in the stone room suffused with the smell of rotting flesh.

"He is also – the fifth member of «Team Inferno»."

Chapter 5: The Princess Maiden of the Grand Shrine

Part 1

"I never imagined that... under the Sanctuary, there are actually such enormous caves!"

"Yes, I don't think even the princess maidens at the « Divine Ritual Institute» know that these caves exist."

Holding in one hand the spirit crystal to light their path, Kamito made his way through the gigantic underground caves.

These caves, made by unknown men, were practically big enough to contain the entire Grand Shrine.

In between the stalactites were massive spiderwebs, bats danced in flight over their heads, and swarms of little bugs on the ground made Fianna shriek involuntarily.

"Your highness, are you all right?"

"I... I am but the esteemed second princess of the Empire... H-How can these mere bugs scare me... Aaaaah !"

"Why be so stubborn... Hey, watch your step."

As the princess let out a shrill scream of fear, Kamito grasped her hand tightly.

"K-Kamito? Wh...?"

"It's a man's duty to protect a woman... Or do you mean to say you dislike holding boys' hands?"

"N-No, it's not that... It's just..."

"Your shriek just now was actually quite cute, you know."

"... I-I hate you! You're so mean, Kamito..."

At Fianna's pouting expression, Kamito could not help but laugh.

Although she liked to tease Kamito mercilessly, once this princess was given a taste of her own medicine, she

would immediately reveal her pure and shy original side .

"Oh, that's right... Why would you know of such a place?"

"When I was still studying at the Institute, I came to this floating island as part of a ritual for the Wind Elemental Lord. A senior told me of this place."

"A senior... Who's that?"

"The Calamity Queen – Rubia Elstein-san."

"... What?!"

At that, Kamito let out an uncontrollable yelp.

"You are old friends with Claire's older sister?"

"Yes. I don't have many close friends, and she... used to be one of them."

Fianna's expression suddenly darkened and grew lonely, and she muttered in the past tense.

"Here, even the highest ranked princess maidens are ordered to stop, so I too don't know why she would know of these caves—" Right at that moment...

"Shhh... Don't say a word!"

Kamito stopped in his tracks and whispered to Fianna.

"What is it?"

"... There's someone nearby."

"How is that possible!? Only I know about th—"

Midway through her sentence, Fianna hastily fell silent .

Because she, too, had noticed the sounds of people talking.

—And if... body cannot bear it, what... do then...

—If so, it will mean... does not have the right to... that's all."

The words reverberated through the caves.

Because of the way the cave walls reflected sound, there was no way of telling how far they were from the speakers.

However, Kamito was certain that he had heard the voice somewhere before.

"That's Muir Alenstarl... So the one speaking to her must be—"

Kamito held onto Fianna's shoulders protectively, and took a deep breath to control his emotions.

"Why would that bastard be here..!"

No mistake about it – the one talking to Muir was indeed Ren Ashbell.

—The very person who carved the «Brand of Darkness » on Kamito, and the very person responsible for the disappearance of Est.

"Damn it..."

If he had been in any condition to, Kamito would have rushed up to confront her.

However, Kamito currently lacked even the ability to summon spirits for battle.

Furthermore, he could not put Fianna in danger.

Kamito could hence only suppress his feelings of anger and aggression, and remain silently in hiding.

The pair's conversation finally ceased.

"... I think they've left."

"Yeah."

Kamito let down his guard, took a breath and said:

"—What... on earth were they just doing?"

"I imagine... maybe performing some kind of ritual magic."

"Ritual magic?"

"Indeed. I heard what sounded like chanting in spirit language, but it sounded a little different to ordinary spirit language... It felt a little sinister, and it made my hair stand."

Fianna's shoulders quivered in fear.

"Why choose such a place to perform ritual magic—"

Kamito furrowed his brow in confusion.

"Hmmm... Say, Kamito?"

"Yes?"

"H-How long are you planning to hug me for?"

"S-Sorry!"

As Fianna blushed furiously, Kamito hastily let go of her.

Part 2

"Oooh... What's wrong with coming along, Kamito you dummy!"

Back in her room, Claire muttered to herself unhappily while collapsing on her bed.

As Ellis and Rinslet were both with their families, who had come to cheer them on, Claire was alone with Scarlet in the house.

"Stupid..."

Casting her face downwards, Claire clutched her pillow tightly.

They definitely had valid reasons, and even, in a manner of speaking, no choice but to leave her by herself.

... However, she couldn't help but feel lonely, as if she had been abandoned by her teammates.

"Who knows... what the two of them are doing..."

As they had left the room, Fianna had even pressed her bosom against Kamito's arm.

Kamito had looked a little surprised, but... how should she say this... seemingly not too repelled either.

"E-Either way, whatever that rascal does with that lascivious princess, it's none of my business..."

... Nevertheless, the bothersome feeling was still gnawing away at her chest.

"... Boys, do they all like big-chested girls?"

Perhaps it was what she had seen in the forbidden books in the Biblion, which detailed a wide variety of rituals involving the bodies of princess maidens, but Claire found herself even more self-conscious about her unimpressive chest.

"S-So unbelievable... That one would actually wedge t-that sort of thing in between...!"

Just the mere passing thought of it left Claire so embarrassed she blushed hotly.

"Put in between..."

Rub rub. Squeeze squeeze.

As a test, she gently rubbed her own tiny breasts.

... It was no good. With such a small chest, it was impossible for her to hold such a thing as illustrated in the book.

The most she would be able to do was rub it on the surface—

"Aaah... W-What nonsense am I thinking!"

Her face red, Claire clutched at her pillow wildly.

"Meow—?"

"S-Scarlet! G-G-G-Go away!"

Claire threw her pillow aside; startled, Scarlet fled from the room.

"..."

She was now truly completely alone in the room.

"... Why don't I... t-t-try out what was written in that book?"

Claire swallowed.

The forbidden book mentioned earlier also contained a method to enlarge one's chest.

Making use of the intelligence that had allowed her to achieve such stellar grades in the Academy, Claire took advantage of a moment when Ellis and Rinslet were distracted to memorize the contents of the script.

"... I-I have to try it to know whether or not it'll really work."

She cleared her throat and removed a small stone from her bag.

A low-level «Thunder Spirit» was sealed within that spirit crystal. Although this type of spirit crystal was expensive, it was also not especially rare; its original purpose was to scare away wild forest creatures.

Claire put it on her white underclothes, and through the cloth gently massaged her chest.

"Mmm..."

The sharp tip of the stone rubbed against her chest painfully, but Claire told herself to be brave and bear it.

She focused on her fingers, concentrating her Divine Power in the spirit crystal.

The normal way of using it would be to summon a burst of Divine Power into it, releasing the spirit sealed within. The trick to this method seemed to be to input Divine Power in a slow, more controlled manner, which would need much more skill – however, this was child's play for an elementalist as talented as Claire.

"Th-This will really enlarge my chest..? Aieeee!"

The sealed spirit suddenly began responding, releasing weak sparks of energy into Claire's body.

The intoxicating comforting feeling made her tremble right down to her fingertips.

"W-What is going on... Uhhh... Aaaah!"

Claire twisted about making noises, pressing the still-sparking spirit crystal against her chest.

"Aaaa-aaah, mmm, aah-ha, aah... oooh..."

Unable to bear the intoxicating pain, she grasped her bedsheets in her fist and gasped deep breaths.

"I must b-be strong, so that my c-chest will get bigger... Aaaah!"

Suddenly, an even stronger jolt of energy surged through her, causing Claire to tremble uncontrollably and lean her body backwards.

W-What now, I c-can't stop..!

As the sweet pain coursed through her, Claire felt herself begin to lose consciousness.

"—What, you rascal, so you'd like me to do these things to you?"

For some unknown reason, at that moment, an image of Kamito floated into Claire's mind. The imaginary Kamito was even looking at her with an expression like

in her favorite romance novels... a cool, cruel, haughty expression.

"O-Of course not! Stupid... Stop now, don't go on any more!"

"Oh... You really wish for me to stop?"

"Huh? .... Aaaa!"

"Look at you, what are those sounds you're making? You really are a dirty young miss."

"Oooh, mmm... W-Who says... Aaaah..."

"Why don't you admit your true feelings, young lady?"

"What t-true feelings... aaaah... ohhh!"

"Uh... That..."

"... Whew... oooh... Kamito, you stu..."

"That... Claire-sama?"

"... Huh!?"

A voice beside her ear jolted Claire back into reality.

Outside the door stood a youthful princess maiden holding a box.

"Waaaah... W-What are you doing!?"

"I-I'm sorry for disturbing you! The door wasn't locked , so—"

The girl nodded in profuse apology.

"C-Can I help you with anything?"

Claire sat up primly, cleared her throat and asked.

"Yes, indeed, someone requested I give you this—"

The girl placed the box in her hands on a rack beside the door.

The box was marked with a seal that Claire was very familiar with.

"This is from Headmistress Greyworth... What could it be?"

Claire opened the box. Inside were huge quantities of books and documents.

Part 3

"– You mean to say, you had a dream about Sacred Queen Areishia?"

"Mmm... I just can't seem to forget about it, that's all."

In the pitch-black cave –

Kamito walked along with Fianna while telling her of his dream earlier that day.

That dream – in which Sacred Queen Areishia used the «Demon Slaying Sacred Sword» to vanquish the Demon King.

Kamito somehow felt that the contents of the dream might have had something to do with Est.

"That would indeed be a memorable dream..."

Fianna put a hand on her chin and thought for a moment, then said:

"Perhaps... What happened was Kamito's thoughts and feelings mixing with Est's."

"What does that mean?"

Kamito only knew a little about these academic matters, but Fianna was once an outstanding princess maiden, so she was very knowledgeable in these areas.

"It's not unusual for elementalists and their contract spirits to have a mental connection in their dreams. Especially when the «gate» between them cannot be opened, such a phenomenon will become even more common."

As Fianna talked, she gestured with her index finger.

"When I lost my connection to my contract spirit, I would frequently dream of a knight charging forth on the battlefield."

The rider in her dream was probably the spirit « Georgios» she commanded. By the looks of it, even if the elementalist lost their power, the connection between the two did not break completely.

"That dream – you don't say it's part of Est's memory?"

If that were true, Est was really the true Demon Slayer Sacred Sword?

"Mmm... To be sure, the picture should have been formed by the mixing of Est's and Kamito's memories – "

Saying this, Fianna suddenly stopped in her tracks.

"I can understand what you're feeling... Because the same tragedy happened to me before."

"Fianna..."

Kamito also stopped and turned to face her.

The second princess of the Empire, the impending successor to Rubia, the anticipated heir princess maiden. Unfortunately, when she lost the ability to command spirits and became a fallen princess maiden, those around her reversed their attitudes and regarded her only with disappointment.

For the young, innocent girl, that would certainly have been an unimaginable horror.

"But Fianna, you did not just give up because of that."

"That was only because of Kamito's efforts."

Looking at him directly, she replied.

"My efforts?"

"Three years ago, the blade dance you presented gave me, a lost elementalist, renewed hope and inspiration. If not for you, Kamito, I suppose I would still be hiding away in the castle right now."

"You exaggerate too much."

Embarrassed, Kamito shook his head.

"Of course not, moreover... Since then, I have felt towards Kamito—"

At that moment, a group of bats suddenly flew past their heads.

"Aaaah!"

Fianna shrieked involuntarily.

Kamito waved the lantern about, only then did the bats fly away, frightened.

"... All right, it's fine now. That's right... What were you about to say just now?"

"N-Nothing! It was nothing!"

Fianna mumbled to herself as if to shrug the matter off , then continued onwards.

... For a lengthy while after, all was quiet between the two apart from the sound of footfalls.

"Oh, Kamito, you don't plan on telling Claire your true identity?"

Fianna's sudden question came out of nowhere.

"Mmm, forget it... If I caused someone's dream to be ruined, I would never be able to live with myself."

For a longed-for dream to always remain as a dream was the most perfect situation of all.

The strongest blade dancer three years ago was long gone now.

It would be better for "her" to remain merely in the imaginations of Claire and her friends.

"Furthermore... If they were to find out about my habit of dressing as a girl, they would surely laugh at me to no end."

Looking down at his outfit, Kamito muttered to himself.

"Hee hee... Does that mean I'm the only one to share in Kamito's little secret?"

Fianna suddenly let slip a gleeful smile, and clutched tightly at Kamito's arm.

"Hey, watch your step."

"It doesn't matter anyway, even if I were to trip, Kamito will catch me before I fall."

"You rascal... Some princess you are, please be a bit more wary of men!"

"Huh, don't you know? In front of a boy she likes, a princess is but an ordinary girl!"

The princess stuck her tongue out at Kamito mischievously.

Her adorable response made Kamito's heart quicken.

"My dear princess, please stop joking around with me."

"... I hate you, I wasn't joking."

Part 4

After quite a while, the two of them finally arrived at the secret tunnels of the Grand Temple.

The path overhead was blocked by a giant stone slab, on which were cramped carvings of words in spirit language.

The exit was right here; the courtyard of the Grand Temple was just outside.

"Kamito, may I climb on your shoulders?"

"Sure, no problem."

Nodding, Kamito bent to allow Fianna to get up.

The feel of her tender thighs on the back of his neck made Kamito's heart involuntarily leap into his throat –

how he hoped she would not get mad at him because of that.

"S-Speaking of which... I really don't have to hide my face?"

"Something so suspicious would in fact make us more easily discovered. Besides, I'm a girl and even I think Kamito looks very pretty, so you don't need to worry at all."

"Such praise really doesn't make me feel any better..."

Then, Fianna chanted what sounded like a magical curse. The spirit words on the stone shone brightly blue, and the entire slab split cleanly down the middle and opened outwards.

Bright moonlight beamed directly into the dark cave.

Night had already fallen upon the outside world, and a bonfire was burning to light the enormous courtyard.

"—It looks like no one's around, let's go now."

Fianna reached out and placed a hand on the ground, then slowly climbed out.

Kamito leaped up in one bound, and followed closely behind her.

Fortunately, the ritual clothing had a long skirt, so even if Kamito were to look up, Fianna's panties would still be hidden.

"What a pity... I'd even specially worn Kamito's favorite knickers today."

"I-I don't even l-like... suspenders!"

"Oooh, it looks like I've hit upon the truth!"

"Uhhh..."

Looking at Kamito's vexed expression, Fianna broke out into peals of laughter.

After climbing to ground level, the two of them hurried to the stone corridor in front of the courtyard.

"I say... If we're found out, will we have to escape from every single Guardian spirit here?"

"Don't look guilty, and we won't be found out."

The two of them exchanged nervous whispers while walking along the stone corridor stretched out before them.

At that moment, a princess maiden appeared in front of them and began walking towards them.

"Ooh!?l

Kamito's heart jolted, and his facial expression hardened.

The girl drew ever closer, step by step—

Just as they were about to pass each other, she suddenly stopped before them and said:

"Please, where are you headed to?"

"To Reicha-sama's chambers. Reicha-sama says she's feeling unwell, so..."

"Oh, is that so? Sorry for your trouble."

Fianna answered the questioning princess maiden with a calm, composed expression on her face, and the latter then turned and left.

"Look, didn't we just successfully pass this trial?"

"Wow... The bravery of the princess maiden really is something else. I was so scared my heart almost stopped "

For a male to enter the «Divine Ritual Institute» was absolutely unheard of. A rule of such importance had never been broken before.

If they were to be caught, in the best case they would be executed, while in the worst case... Never mind, it was best not to think about it.

"This way."

Fianna, who was walking in front, gestured surreptitiously with her hand.

Following her lead—

"..."

– The pair reached the end of the lengthy corridor, where there were a set of grand doors decorated with intricate carvings.

The decor of this door was noticeably different to the other doors: inlaid on the frame of the door were several very pure and valuable spirit crystals.

"... Uh... Fianna, may I ask a question?"

Kamito inquired, a twitching expression on his face.

"What is it?"

"This door wouldn't happen to be... Never mind, I guess it goes without saying..."

"Indeed, it's just what Kamito thinks."

Fianna shrugged her shoulders at Kamito naughtily.

"I've no choice... Which other princess maidens are of a higher status than I am out there, other than these ladies? "

"Are you serious?"

"Don't worry, I'm absolutely certain."

Finishing her sentence, Fianna knocked smartly on the door thrice, according to the proper regulations.

The duo waited for a while—

Finally, the grand doors gradually opened.

The sight that greeted them was—

A red carpet that stretched out straight before them, and brightly glittering spirit crystals.

This was a holy space, filled with the aura of somber tranquility.

A thin curtain hung at the far end of the room; behind that was the silhouette of a small slight figure.

"What does the visitor want? I believe I have already instructed not to have my meal—"

The high stately voice rang out into the hall.

However, undeterred, Fianna walked forward and said:

"Long time no see, Reicha. How have you been lately?"

"... Huh?"

The maiden hastily pulled aside the curtain, then – her jaw dropped in shock.

"... It can't be, Fianna-sempai!?"

Part 5

Reicha Alminas.

She was one of the «Queens» to have gained the honor of serving the five Elemental Lords.

There were only five Queens in the entire continent, and they were the most eminent of all princess maidens.

Although Fianna had said she wanted to bring Kamito to meet a high-ranked princess maiden—

He had never for a moment dreamed that she was referring to a current Queen.

"Why didn't you tell me this before?"

"Because... If I had, you wouldn't have come, would you Kamito?"

Kamito could not hide his conflicting feelings. Likewise, the girl seated beside him was also nervously averting her gaze, and looked rather uneasy.

The girl had glossy black hair neatly done up in braids, and cute eyes like that of a small animal.

Dressed in bright red ritual clothing, she looked like a butterfly about to take flight.

At fifteen, she was a year younger than Kamito. Like Rubia Elstein, she was one of Fianna's few close friends and confidantes while she was at the «Divine Ritual Institute».

She served the Fire Elemental Lord – in other words, she succeeded the Calamity Queen elementalist's position.

Kamito had already introduced himself, removed his disguise, and revealed that he was in truth male.

Upon discovering that Kamito was in fact male, Reicha very nearly fainted on the spot, and only managed to stay conscious thanks to Fianna's eloquent explanations.

"I-I-If I am ungracious, it is because it is my f-first time talking to a male..."

"N-Never mind. I should be the one apologizing, to barge in on you suddenly like this."

Looking at the Queen bobbing her head apologetically in his direction, Kamito also bowed his head in response.

Despite obviously being the highest ranked princess maiden in the continent, she was nonetheless humble and polite.

Due to her rank, Kamito should have used genteel, formal language when addressing her. However, regardless of that fact, she nonetheless looked like an ordinary young girl, so Kamito could not help but speak to her as an equal.

"Hee hee, little Reicha is still as cute as ever."

Fianna smiled mischievously and reached out to feel her small chest.

"Ah – ! S-Sempai, what are you doing!"

"Your chest seems to have gotten a little bigger?"

"Oooh... I-I really haven't...!"

Reicha blushed and twisted her body defensively.

... Even if she was indeed an old friend, to do something like that to a Queen was pushing it a little, wasn't it?

Kamito broke out into a cold sweat and averted his eyes awkwardly.

The two girls reminisced fondly for a while, then—

"Reicha, actually... I have a favor to ask of you."

Fianna made her request with a serious expression.

"A favor – yes?"

Reicha blinked, not understanding.

"Mmhmm, I need to borrow your power, to break the curse on him – Kamito."

"You mean to say this male has been cursed?"

The Fire Queen asked, turning to look at Kamito.

"My blade spirit might have been trapped by this curse . Please save her, I beg you." Kamito placed both his hands on the ground and pleaded with Reicha with all his heart.

"That is a curse so strong that even I cannot break it. However, you have received the blessing of the Fire Elemental Lord; with that power, you can surely destroy even the harshest of curses."

"You are right. If I use the «Sacred Flames of Judgment », any curse will turn into smoke, that's true. But..."

Reicha lowered her head and mumbled.

It was only natural that she would hesitate.

Even on the behest of one of her best friends, Fianna, she was nevertheless a «Queen» who had to follow rules and do things by the book.

Using the Fire Elemental Lord's power for personal gains was an act that would never be condoned.

A long period of silence ensued, and then—

"I know."

"Huh?"

At that, Kamito raised his head and regarded Reicha quizzically.

"Because it is sempai's request, so... But only this once; I will not make this exception again."

The Fire Queen let out a sigh, and nodded her head as if making a decision.

Part 6

After a while more—

"– Now then, let's begin the ritual."

Reicha, who had changed into a set of pure white ritual clothes, knelt demurely in front of Kamito.

Her serene, assured appearance contrasted sharply with that of the nervous, embarrassed young girl just a while ago; they seemed like virtually two different people.

So as not to disrupt the ritual, Fianna had retreated to a corner of the room to guard them from afar.

"I'll leave everything in your hands, R-Reicha-sama."

"Please, just call me Reicha, Kamito-sama."

The Fire Queen smiled quietly, then caressed Kamito's hand gently.

"Will you be scared – I mean, scared to touch a male's body?"

"... To be honest, yes, a little scared. But... you are a friend of my sempai."

"It seems like you trust Fianna a lot."

"... Yes, indeed. Fianna-sempai was one of the only people to stand by my side."

Reicha mumbled to herself, as if recalling a faraway memory of some past event. The rapport between the two seemed to go deeper than mere friendship.

"Also, I can feel it, you're not a dangerous evil person."

"Is that so?"

"Don't judge me based on my looks and age. I am after all a Queen, and I am quite confident in my ability to assess people."

Reicha said with a genuine smile.

Her smile was full of charm, and could easily mesmerize someone looking at it.

"Now, then, Kamito-sama, please remove your shirt."

"Oh... Mmm-hmm..."

Kamito nodded, and took off the thin tunic he was wearing under the princess maiden dress.

The «Brand of Darkness» on his chest, positioned just above his heart, had turned into a pitch-black wound.

"Ahhh... T-That's really something...!"

Reicha clapped both hands to her cheeks, blushing furiously red.

"T-This is my first time seeing a m-male's body..."

"Oh, is that so..."

Kamito looked away, feeling a little uneasy.

To have his naked body scrutinized so closely by a girl made him mysteriously embarrassed.

"Kamito, your face is very red."

Standing at a side of the room, Fianna said, then immediately coughed a few times.

Reicha stretched out a hand nervously to touch Kamito's chest.

"... Very... very firm and solid!"

"It's alright, it's a result of all the training at the Instructional School..."

The Queen's slim fingers wandered along Kamito's naked upper body, making him itch slightly.

However, where her fingers touched, he suddenly felt waves of aching pain.

Then, Reicha shut her eyes, and solemnly began chanting a curse in spirit language.

"O supreme master of all earthly flames, our harsh judge and great warrior—

These were the words of the prayer for a ritual dedicated to the «Fire Elemental Lord».

Reicha's hair started blowing wildly as if by a hot gust of wind, and a bright white light shone at her fingertips.

"Sacred Flames of Judgment – redeem our sins and cleanse our filth—

The words coming from her thin pale lips were the highest level of spirit language, the High Ancient.

The little girl before his eyes seemed to be possessed.

"... Oooo, uhhhhh...!"

Kamito let out uncontrollable moans of pain.

The bright blue flames from Reicha's fingertips were burning his skin, scorching his flesh.

"Oww... aaaaaaaa... aaah—!"

The unimaginable pain seemed to morph into the roar of a monstrous beast, which rushed out of Kamito's throat.

He felt a sharp tinnitus, as if fireworks were exploding in his head. Sweat oozed from his every pore, and his muscles tensed so hard as to nearly break his bones.

"Into ash and dust! Your flames can purify all darkness , burn away all curses!"

The «Brand of Darkness» imprinted on Kamito's chest suddenly started burning intensely.

"... – !"

Kamito burst into wordless howls.

In his quickly fading awareness – Kamito felt a dull pain coming from his right hand.

– Could it be... Est's spirit mark...!?

Just as he saw, from the corner of his eye, his spirit mark began radiating a bright light—

Kamito lost consciousness, and plunged into darkness.

Chapter 6: The Sacred Sword's Memories

Part 1

In the bottomless darkness, Kamito fell endlessly.

Engulfed by the blackness, Kamito opened his eyes in the viscous darkness.

He could not feel the passing of time – it might have been a few hours, or maybe a few seconds, he had lost the capability to perceive it.

In this space, Kamito found a sword swallowed by the darkness.

It was a beautiful long sword inscribed with spirit language.

Upon seeing the sword, every fibre of Kamito's body awakened.

– It's Est!

He was certain this feeling could not be wrong.

He brushed away the heavy nether entangling him, and approached the sword.

But, the moment his hand touched the handle of the sword –

The sword suddenly emitted a bright dazzling light that pushed away Kamito's outstretched hand.

"What!?"

A sharp pain pierced his fingertips.

This was – an obvious rejection.

"Est... Why – "

"– Kamito, I cannot be your sword."

"I don't understand what you're saying!"

"– Because, I can recall it now. My sins... my unforgivable sins."

"Sins?"

In his mind, this word could hardly be linked with the beautiful, radiant silver sword before his eyes.

"I do not wish to repeat my mistakes, so – "

... This is... What...?

Kamito felt a splitting pain in his head.

A tremendous rush of images flooded into his head.

... A-Are these Est's memories?

Part 2

This was a story that had happened in the distant past.

At that time, the continent was separated into several tiny countries. It was a time of war and turmoil.

The main characters of the story were the sacred sword of legend and a young maiden.

Areishia Idriss – this girl came from a nameless village by the border.

The shepherd girl had a lovely face, and she was especially proud of her head of brilliant gold hair.

She ought to have grown up normally, fallen in love normally, led a normal life, and found normal happiness.

However, the year she turned fourteen, an incident happened to this otherwise ordinary girl that led people to call her the Sacred Queen.

One day, when she ascended the mountain to pick firewood, she happened upon a sword in the old ancestral hall.

It was a sacred sword that no one in many centuries had been able to remove.

The maiden reached out to lift the sword, completely unaware that a powerful spirit was sealed inside it.

In that instant, a blade spirit emerged from the dazzling glow.

"Who are you?"

The blade spirit's response to the girl's question was:

"I am your sword, milady. I will give myself wholly and completely to my elementalist – you."

The girl did not know why the sacred sword of legend would pick her, a mere ordinary shepherd girl, to make a contract with. However, she innocently accepted this contract.

Truthfully, the girl felt only loneliness.

On the other hand, the blade spirit had no feelings, and knew only to loyally serve its contracted master, the girl.

She was not a typical spirit, but a spirit weapon crafted for use in the war during the Archeozoic Era.

So I have no use for feelings – said the blade spirit coldly.

However, because the girl had lived her whole life as an ordinary shepherd, she could not understand such deep philosophical matters.

That sort of thing isn't important –

The girl was simply happy at having found her first female friend.

"What is your name?"

"My true name cannot be pronounced in your language. However, in spirit language, you may call me «Terminus Est»."

"This name sounds a little long... How about I just call you Est?"

"My name is not Est, it is Terminus Est."

"I'd rather not, it's quite hard to say. It's decided then, your name shall be Est."

The girl broke into a sudden smile, and reached out to pet Est on the head.

"Mistress, please do not do that."

Est protested with a blank expression.

This is the story of what happened after the chance encounter of the Sacred Queen and the legendary sacred sword.

The matter of the contract between the unknown shepherd girl and the legendary sacred sword quickly spread throughout the entire country.

That a young lady with no elementalist heritage could contract with a legendary-level spirit – such a thing was enough to turn the girl into a savior, into a supernatural sacred queen.

As there were virtually no elementalists in that era, people had to endure the havoc wreaked by the revolting spirits.

And so, the girl began using the power provided by the blade spirit to bring peace to the world, by either appeasing – or defeating those spirits.

The people lauded the girl's efforts, and gave her the name of «Sacred Queen».

Regardless of how exhausted or unhappy she was, the girl would always have a smile to encourage others.

There were some who were jealous of her, who despised her, and even those who only associated with her for the fame and glory.

Despite all this, the girl still fought on, sword in hand.

"Mistress, why do you fight for these people?"

One day, the blade spirit asked the girl this question.

Why fight – this was the first time the sword, by nature a spirit weapon, had felt any sort of curiosity towards such matters.

"Because this is something only I can do; therefore I must fight."

"I cannot understand your meaning. But as I am your sword, I will do your bidding, mistress."

"Est... Don't say such upsetting things, you are after all my only friend."

"... Friend?"

"That's fine, let's eat. The bread I baked today smells delicious."

"Mistress, please allow me to repeat – I have no need to consume human foods."

"... It's really lonely eating by myself. Come on, eat with me, please?"

"... If this is my mistress's order, I will obey."

The blade spirit nodded expressionlessly.

However, one could observe a little confusion on her face.

In her heart sprouted a very tiny flicker of – something like an emotion.

The bravery of the girl with the sacred sword slowly became known across the whole continent.

At the same time, the terror of the most vicious demon king plunged the continent into strife and suffering.

The countries united to send out armies to take down the demon king, but they all failed miserably. In the face of the spirit soldiers commanded by the demon king, the countries's armies could only beat a quick retreat.

In the end, the people had no choice but to pin their last hopes on a young lady.

A mere girl of only fourteen years of age, a girl who had not even experienced the taste of love.

"Est, I must fight... I must fight, for everyone who is suffering on this earth."

"Yes, mistress. I am your sword – I will do anything for you."

And so it was that the girl plunged herself wholeheartedly into the bloody battle.

The blade spirit of what would later be known as the « Demon Slayer Sacred Sword» witnessed all this.

She had no choice but to bear witness to the entire series of events – including the tragic conclusion about to unfold.

Part 3

"– to... Kamito!"

"Mmmhm..."

Kamito opened his eyes to find Fianna looking at him anxiously.

"Kamito... Are you all right?"

"I-I fainted..?"

"Mmm, but just for a few minutes."

"Is that so..."

He felt as if he had been unconscious for several hours, but it appeared as if that was not the case.

Reicha, who was breathing heavily by the side, continued by saying:

"I have successfully removed the «Brand of Darkness» on Kamito-sama."

"... Really?"

"Yes, but..."

Reicha's face fell and she murmured in a low voice.

"I'm afraid Kamito-sama's blade spirit... has not yet..."

"..."

Kamito shifted his gaze towards the spirit mark on his right hand.

The mark that had just been shining brightly was now completely unresponsive.

"Est..."

"Kamito-sama... During the period you were unconscious, did you see anything in your mind?"

"In my mind..."

Kamito rubbed his aching temples, then –

He suddenly seemed to remember something.

A sword, falling in endless darkness.

And being sharply rejected when he stretched out his hand towards Est.

In that moment, Kamito recalled her memories.

He recalled the memory of Est with a girl – the first one she had made a contract with.

What he did not understand, though, was why that memory would make Est reject him.

"Unforgivable sin... was that it?"

... Was that what was trapping Est in the darkness, her unforgivable sin?

"Ooooo.."

Then, Reicha suddenly went limp and fell towards the ground.

"Are you all right!?"

Kamito quickly rushed to support her.

Her slim body lay weakly in Kamito's arms.

"Should we take you to the infirmary?"

"Y-Yes. I'm so sorry, I seem to be a little tired..."

"Ritual magic is very tiring, furthermore just yesterday Reicha had to perform the ritual of listening to the pronouncements of the Elemental Lord."

"I'm sorry... It's all because of me..."

"Don't say that, it's my body that has always been weak..."

As Reicha shook her head in denial, Kamito lay her down on the bed to rest.

"We should make a move, the princess maiden responsible for attending to the Queens is coming soon."

"Mmmhm, I know."

Kamito nodded in agreement, bowed deeply towards Reicha and said:

"Reicha, thank you for saving me. I won't forget this debt I owe you."

"N-No need to be so..."

"We'll meet next time. Then, I'll meet you as the victor of the «Blade Dance»."

Fianna and Reicha, the latter still resting on the bed, grasped each other's hands tightly.

"All right. Although I cannot cheer for teams representing specific countries at the opening ceremony, you can be sure I will be supporting sempai's team in my heart."

Part 4

Inside the bag that the messenger from the school had sent to Claire's room were the latest updates about their enemies.

"In conclusion, the top priority now should be to formulate a plan of attack for Kamito to take action outside the battlefront."

All alone, Claire paced the empty room while reading the material, thinking deeply about battle tactics.

"Ellis will find it too hard to attack at the frontline by herself, should I also remain at the front or not..?"

Up until now, the plan had been for Kamito to use his overwhelming force to attack at the forefront, while the other four would assist him from the side. However, with Kamito unable to summon Est, this plan simply could not be used.

The alternative she thought of now was to move Claire , who would originally have been in the middle orchestrating the entire assault, to the front, and have her attack alongside Ellis. While this arrangement was nowhere near as likely to penetrate an enemy's defenses as the one with Kamito attacking alone, fire and wind elements naturally complemented each other very well, which gave them much offensive potential.

"But... If so, I'd worry about something happening to Fianna at the rear."

Fianna had received virtually no combat training, and her usual role was to provide assistance from the rear through her rituals, which would increase the power of blade spirits. In the previous plan, Claire would protect her from the centre, but if Claire were to be moved to the front, she would have no way of ensuring Fianna's safety

. In that case, all depended on whether Rinslet, who played the dual roles of sniper and support fire, could protect her alone.

"... This plan must also be reconsidered."

Claire crumpled up the piece of paper she had been making notes on and threw it away.

Scarlet helped her turn the waste paper on the floor into ashes.

"I've thought for so long and I still haven't come up with any good ideas..."

Any plan she could think of had an obvious flaw, and none were suitable solutions.

"... Turns out that we have always relied too much on Kamito and Est."

Claire sighed, and turned back to the documents provided to them by the Academy.

Aside from formulating their own strategies, it was important in such a long drawn-out war to also analyze their opponents' situations, so as to take advantage of their weaknesses.

It goes without saying that the opponent we need to be most wary of is –

Claire flipped open the document and looked down at its first page.

What was written on it was – the Team Representing the Religious Country of Alphas.

This document was regarding the strongest of the blade dancer teams – «Team Inferno».

However, the forms on the document were virtually all blank, as they had no way of finding out even the names of the team members.

The only information they had about this enemy's military capability was the elementalist girl who had attacked Claire and the others last night – Muir Alenstarl.

Frankly speaking, if there were three other elementalists as skilled as she was on their team... their chances of winning were nil.

"Overall, let's keep this in mind for later consideration."

She put the document on her lap, and began browsing the other reports.

There were a total of twenty-four teams contesting in the Blade Dance. Generally speaking, every country could enter one team, but countries such as the Ordesia Empire, which were large and had many outstanding elementalists, could field several teams.

The Quina Empire in the east and the Island Nation of Robica had two teams each, and the only country other than Ordesia to be represented by three teams was the Holy Kingdom of Lugia.

Of the teams from these countries, the ones they most needed to watch out for were the «Four Gods» of Quina, the «Sacred Knights» of the Holy Kingdom of Lugia, and Milla Bassett – the most talented young elementalist in

this iteration of the Blade Dance was representing the Principality of Rossvale as part of the «Rupture Division».

And then there was –

"– Public Enemy Number One... the Dracunia Duchy's «Dragon Knights»."

Dracunia had emerged victorious in many previous seasons of the Blade Dance, and was indeed a strong country with a stellar track record.

And Claire herself had seen Leonora's power up close before.

Her destructive «Death Gaze» – her Nidhogg had displayed immense overwhelming force to destroy the flying craft's military spirits.

The documents supplied by the Academy listed her power as being of AAA grade.

Claire had earned an AA grade while at the Academy, and so had Ellis. Rinslet was A, while Fianna was D. However, Fianna's grade was recorded when she was not officially studying, so it was not an accurate measure.

Incidentally, the one who singlehandedly took down « Team Scarlet», Velsaria Eva, was graded AAA.

Of course, because this was an overall analysis done up by lecturers at the Academy, one could not rely wholly on it to predict an elementalist's strength. For example, even though Rinslet was graded one level lower than Claire, when the two of them fought, they were often evenly-matched.

"... In conclusion, it is just a rough guideline."

Leonora Lancaster is a very outstanding elementalist; that was the undeniable truth.

But here in the «Blade Dance», in a gathering of the best elementalists, there was actually nothing exceptional about her.

However... Leonora's file contained something that was particularly noteworthy.

It was information about «dragon blood» – the power she gained from her special bloodline.

Looking at Leonora's new evaluation after the discovery of her special power, Claire could not help but stare, her eyes wide in surprise.

"– S level."

Historically, there have only been a handful of elementalists ever to have earned such a grade. In recent years, the young Greyworth Ciel Mais had been ranked SS level, but that truly was an exception among exceptions.

Leonora's power was first revealed publicly when she was fourteen. She awakened in the trial rally for the Knights of the Dragon Emperor, and in a matter of mere minutes, demolished all other competitors who had also been hoping to join the ranks of the Knights.

According to the booklet, the «dragon blood» power could not be unleashed at will, but was an ability that was almost uncontrollably explosive –

"If at all possible, I hope we won't have to face her."

Claire signed, and placed the half-read booklet on the table.

At that time, the door suddenly opened – it was Kamito, who had changed back into his normal uniform.

"Kamito... Hey, why do you look like you can barely even stand!"

Turning pale, Claire bolted up from the chair and rushed to his side.

"... The curse-breaking ritual was more exhausting than I had imagined."

Not caring that he was still dressed in his uniform, Kamito collapsed onto his bed.

"And the «Brand of Darkness»?"

"Mmmm... All thanks to Fianna's princess maiden friend, the curse was successfully broken."

Kamito unbuttoned his shirt to reveal the scar on his chest –

"Aieeeeah!"

"What's with that cute shrill scream..."

"W-Who asked you to suddenly take off your clothes!"

Blushing in embarrassment, Claire yelped.

She sneaked a glance at Kamito's firm, muscled chest... and something started thumping wildly in her own chest .

"But, the thing is, Est still hasn't – "

Kamito cast his gaze downwards and shook his head.

"Oh..."

Looking at Kamito's sad hopeless expression, Claire could not help but also feel her heart aching for him.

Kamito was powerful, so powerful that he left his same-age counterparts at the Institutional school in the dust.

Precisely because of that, it was easy to forget one thing –

In truth, Kamito, like his friends, was just an easily hurt sixteen-year-old.

Claire leapt lightly onto the bed, leaned tenderly on Kamito's side and said:

"Don't worry, Est will definitely come back."

"Claire..."

Kamito suddenly lifted his head –

"... I can see your panties."

"... Huh? Waaaahhhh! Stupid... You're so stupid! Pervert!"

Part 5

The tower resonated with the music of the ball. Meanwhile, in the garden...

Stood that girl in the bright red mask.

"It is finally about to begin... Ren Ashbell."

"Yes."

A black-winged angel suddenly fell behind her.

The girl had hair as black as midnight and eyes as amber as the sunset; she was surely the darkness elemental Restia.

"It seems that... Kamito has passed your trial."

"That the blade spirit would move to take the brunt of the curse was a surprise to me, but that was only an emergency solution – the «gate» that has been opened will definitely not be able to close now."

Ren Ashbell spoke coldly.

"If he really becomes swallowed by the darkness, won't that ruin your plans?"

"If that man's tolerance level is so low, he would not be able to become my trump card, in any case."

"Have you found a Queen willing to serve him?"

"I have found several candidates to choose from, but that is none of your business."

"– The candidate you speak of wouldn't happen to be your sister, would it?"

All of a sudden, the grass and trees all around them burst into flames.

And in a moment, turned into ashes that scattered to the ground.

"Darkness elemental, you would do well to watch your tone of voice."

"Oooh, scary... I was just joking."

The only things to be heard in the darkness were the endless echoes of mocking laughter.

The black-winged darkness elemental had already disappeared, unnoticed.

Ren Ashbell smacked her lips lightly, and turned her gaze towards a cluster of trees in the garden.

"– Eavesdropping is an activity only for lowlifes... Dracunia girl."

"You mustn't be serious, you found out a long time ago, didn't you?"

The figure that emerged from behind the trees was indeed the Dracunia contestant Leonora Lancaster.

She was staring intently at Ren Ashbell with pupils glowing red.

She was emanating a dangerously murderous aura, so much so that anyone would have been aware of her presence.

She was holding a huge blade – the Dragon Slayer Sacred Sword.

"– Look at you all fierce-like, what highly important matter can I help you with?"

"The «dragon» within me wishes to do battle with a fellow strong warrior. I hope you will accept."

Although Leonora's choice of words was polite, her tone of voice revealed her unconcealable intense feelings.

Her eyes burned with the aggressive hunger of someone looking for a good fight. Anyone who knew her normal personality would surely think that this was someone else altogether.

"You have the Dracunia-inherited blood of the dragon, do you now – you certainly are one interesting girl."

Ren Ashbell mused from behind her mask.

"Come... Strongest blade dancer, draw your sword!"

Leonora grasped her sword tightly, preparing herself to meet an attack. Her conscious mind tried to temper her impulsivity with logic and reason, but her body gave off an aura that made one think that she was liable to attack them at any moment.

"Think of your own standard and reconsider. A rookie like you isn't even worth using my Godslaying Flame on. "

"You will... regret this... Ren Ashbell!"

Leonora, rendered incoherent by rage, charged forward with all her strength.

She struck a blow far stronger and faster than any mere human would have been able to muster.

In a flash, the stone flooring in the garden shattered into innumerable fragments and flew in all directions – !

Except –

"Nice move, but too bad... Swords can't cut through flames."

In the spot where Leonora's sword had struck, the figure of the Strongest Blade Dancer was nowhere to be found.

"... What!?"

Leonora turned; right then, a mighty force struck her directly on the chest.

"Oooh... Aaaah...!"

Leonora bent over in pain, and the masked girl murmured beside her ear:

"It might be interesting to take the «dragon» to meet the «demon king». Power like yours might just be useful to assist in his awakening."

"... What... are you... saying..."

With her hand still pressed to Leonora's chest, on the spot where her blow had struck her, Ren Ashbell chanted a brief curse.

A black flame emerged from her fingertips, then spread to Leonora's heart.

"Rejoice, Dracunia girl – I will tell you who your most suitable opponent is."

"Aaaaa... aaaaaaaaaaah!"

The girl's tortured cry reverberated through the garden –

Leonora then lost consciousness.

Part 6

In the darkness – Est sat, holding her knees, her head bowed, silent and deep in thought.

She was overjoyed that Kamito was willing to take her back.

She was also happy that he thought of her as an irreplaceable part of his existence.

However, Est was herself unable to return those feelings.

Because she was constrained by the memories given to her by her «main body».

– Becoming his sword was an unforgivable action.

– Becoming his sword was an unforgivable action.

– Becoming his sword was an unforgivable action.

The mantra repeated itself continuously, endlessly.

Blade spirit Est – her existence was a sin branded on her body that could never be removed.

"... Kamito... I... I can no longer..."

In the unknown darkness, Est began to cry.

Part 7

The Savior Queen stood for a long while on the vast mountainous plains, her sword plunged into the ground.

Her current state was nothing like the Sacred Queen the people knew of – her pure white armor was stained with blood and filth, while her usual optimism was nowhere to be found.

The girl was battling enemies greater than just the armies of the Demon King.

She also had to face endless victories and losses, schemes and betrayals.

Somewhere along the way, the number of people she could trust dwindled down to one – the sword that had fought alongside her the entire journey.

"Let me ask you, Est..."

"Mistress, what request do you have?"

"Are you willing to stay by my side always?"

The girl broke into a smile reserved only for her best friend – the tender smile of an innocent shepherd girl.

"I am your sword; I will protect you until the end of your life."

"You are right... You are my sword, and for now that is all that matters."

At Est's emotionless response, the girl smiled a hollow smile.

"Mistress?"

"But, one day, when the demon king is defeated, when this war is over, I hope you can become – "

Then, the girl had said something –

Something that, no matter how hard she tried, Est simply could not remember.

Chapter 7:The Real Battle Begins

Part 1

The hall was filled with nervousness and excitement.

A large amount of spectators from every country in the continent had gathered in the hall.

Mixed in with the influential nobles and princess maidens from every country in the continent's training facilities, were girls wearing the Areishia Academy school uniform.

The Blade Dance competitors assembled above an altar in the center.

Because the audience was comprised of the nobility, there was no unsightly jeering.

It seemed like there were fans of the elementalists, so each appearance of the representing teams was followed by high-pitched cheering.

"Ojou-sama, please do you best~!"

"I will believe in and await ojou-sama's victory! Glory to the Laurenfrost!"

At the front of the spectators were Carol and Mireille waving a white banner.

"J-Jeez, those two.....that's embarrassing!"

Rinslet blushed and hid behind Kamito.

"Kamito, stay vigilant. You are attracting a lot of attention."

"Yeah, got it."

At Ellis' words, Kamito surveyed the area and felt many gazes upon him.

Other than Leonora, it seemed that Muir whom they'd fought yesterday was also here.

It doesn't appear that they know I've lost Est yet.....

If they did know of Kamito's situation, they wouldn't be be looking at him vigilantly but instead with the look of a falcon eyeing its prey.

"Fufu, Kamito is popular."

Fianna said teasingly.

Besides «Team Inferno», twenty-three teams had gathered.

Even within them, Dracunia's Knights of the Dragon Emperor had an overwhelming presence.

Around the leader, Leonora, elite elementalists assembled. The Knights of the Dragon Emperor were a military unit with rigid rules. All of the members stood straight up without moving.

Kamito's eyes met with Leonora's.

Those red eyes were incomparable to when they'd met at the library yesterday.

Chills ran down his spine for an instant.

It was like the feeling of being stared at by a giant predator.

"—Dracunia's Dragon Knights training is high quality. Even excluding Leonora, they seem to have no openings. "

Ellis noted as she analyzed the enemy teams.

"Yes, if we leave aside «Team Inferno», they are one of the favorites to win. There are also other teams to be wary of."

Claire said that in a whisper and Fianna and Rinslet also turned their heads in his direction.

"First, there are the two representatives from the same academy as us, «Team Wyvern» and «Team Cernunnos». On top of that, the druid girl has an overwhelming advantage outdoors. There's a chance she'll incite all the magical beasts in the forest to attack us."

Moreover, they had already experienced a severe loss during practice against that druid girl. There were certainly opponents he didn't want to have to fight.

Then Claire turned her gaze upon the team that wore foreign outfits.

"They're Quina Empire's prided «Four Gods». They're a team that specializes in battle tactics."

Quina Empire was a large country located on the eastern part of the continent. It had a completely different culture compared to the western countries like Ordesia.

"The white-haired one is their ace, Shao Fu. She uses the divine beast spirit «Byakko»."

"Four Gods? Even though there are five people?"

"The fifth is probably the one that controls the Four Gods."

Answering Kamito, Claire moved her gaze to the group that was wearing white holy garments.

"Those are the Holy Kingdom of Lugia's Sacred Spirit Knights. The ace is the runner-up from last time, Sacred Knight Luminaris."

"Geh!?"

Kamito slipped out a surprised yelp at that name.

"Kamito-san, did something happen?"

"N-No, it's nothing....."

Kamito quickly shook his head at the puzzled Rinslet's question.

I'm sure she was the holy spirit user. Because it was a bad match with Restia's darkness attribute, the fight was quite harsh.

Holding the Blade Dance after only three years was extremely rare. It usually took decades and sometimes only happened once in a hundred years.

Because of the age restrictions on eligible princess maidens, crossing blades with the same opponent should never happen, but it seems this time was a case filled with special occurrences.

"She's nineteen so she's the oldest one at this Blade Dance. It seems that she swore to defeat Ren Ashbell to restore her honor."

"I-I see....."

"Kamito-kun, you're making quite a sour face."

Fianna teased the bitter-faced Kamito.

"Next is the Principality of Rossvale's «Rupture Division». Their ace is Milla Bassett, the youngest this time at thirteen years old. Though they're an emerging nation that gained independence from the Holy Kingdom of Lugia only within the last few decades, their elementalists are said to be top-class."

"—And them?"

Kamito looked towards the team that had been glaring in their direction since a while ago.

"The representatives from the Kingdom of Balstan. They're under the direct control of the royalty."

"Why are they glaring at us?"

"Umm.....that's probably because of me."

Claire said so like it was hard for her.

"What do you mean?"

"Remember, it's because I slapped their prince yesterday—"

"......Ahh, I see."

Kamito finally remembered.

The crown prince of the Kingdom of Balstan. The prince that had acted out of interest and tried to kiss Claire.

"So it's because you embarrassed them."

"It's good enough if that crown prince understands with his body!"

For some reason, Rinslet was more angry than Claire.

"The Kingdom of Balstan's royalty may have ordered them to take revenge. Sorry, I carelessly created this mess ."

"No, if Claire hadn't done anything back then, I would have."

"......Eh? Um, that means......"

As Claire's face went red.

A commotion started near the entrance of the great shrine.

"—So they've finally come."

Part 2

The instant Ren Ashbell entered, the commotion died down.

She led four elementalists that were wearing hoods which extended to cover their entire body.

"So that's «Team Inferno»....."

Kamito stopped breathing and watched them.

He immediately discovered the small girl with ash grey hair.

The «Instructional School»'s monster — Military Spirit User, Muir Alenstarl.

She quickly averted her eyes after meeting Kamito's.

Walking next to Muir was a tall girl with jade green hair. Her ears which were characteristic of the Elfim race were visible under the hood. Elfim specialized in covert operations within forests, so she might have been an intelligence-gathering elementalist.

Another was a girl with eye-popping blue hair. She was the only one who had luxurious gold and silver accessories lining her hood and she carried a folding fan with a gaudy design.

"The crest of the Alphas Theocracy royal family — don't tell me, «Demon Caster» Sjora Kahn!?"

"You know her?"

He asked and Claire nodded.

"She's the number one witch in their kingdom, the admired successor of the «Dusk Witch»."

"To think that other than Muir, such characters would be there....."

Kamito groaned while wiping the sweat from his brow .

But more oppressive than those three and drawing most of the spectators' gazes — the last person.

At the appearance of that person, the silence that had overtaken the hall was replaced once again with clamor.

".....Who is that, that person!?"

A black knight covered in jet black armor.

It wasn't just her appearance that was strange. Her entire body was covered in a mysterious aura.

A existence that was never meant to be here — for some reason, that was what he felt.

"What a repulsive divine power....."

Fianna, who was more receptive, said in a shaky voice.

Ren Ashbell noticed Kamito and walked straight over to him.

Silence fell and the ringing of iron shoes echoed.

"Kamito....."

"It's fine."

Shielding the nervous ojou-samas behind him, Kamito took a step forward.

And stood off against the crimson-masked girl.

"To think there was someone who could break the « Brand of Darkness»."

"It's a pity. Things won't go how you want them to."

Kamito returned the gaze of the crimson pupils within the mask.

"That brand was only for the purpose of jump starting the awakening of the «Maou» within you. Once the « Gate» has been opened, it can never return to how it was before."

"—What is this maou you speak of?"

Ren Ashbell smiled within her mask and whispered in a voice so others couldn't hear.

"If you want to know, ascend and face me — Ren Ashbell."

"Ren Ashbell, huh. Having you say that is the greatest irony."

Kamito clicked his tongue and groaned.

"But I'll clarify this. If I beat you, you'll tell me everything."

"What confidence for someone who's lost their contracted spirit."

"Est will definitely return. She is my best partner."

Ren Ashbell shrugged, turned on her heel and left without another word.

And thus the short exchange between the two Ren Ashbells ended.

Commotion returned to the great shrine hall again.

Above the bonfire burning at the altar, five spirit maidens appeared.

Amongst them was Reicha Alminas.

When he had met her yesterday, she had been a normal docile girl, but wrapped in her ritual clothes and performing a ritual, she certainly had the presence of one the five highest princess maidens.

Eventually, the «Tempest» details appeared from the five spirit maidens.

The introduction to the Blade Dance was held in the northern forest area of Ragna Ys.

The field was covered by a separating barrier cast by all the «Divine Ritual Institute»'s princess maidens, so it was impossible to leave by normal means. Each country's representatives were transported with their respective teams to random locations and, over the course of seven days, would offer up their blade dances.

There was one rule — you may not kill an elementalist .

The «Blade Dance» was not a martial arts match, but a dance ritual.

There was no way it would be allowed to taint the ritual offered to the spirit kings with a death.

The competition was decided by gathering the special spirit stones distributed to the representatives — the « Magic Stones».

If a competitor was separated from their «Magic Stones» for more than one minute, they would be forcefully teleported out.

Seven days from the opening of the battle. The four teams that had assembled the greatest amounts of « Magic Stones» would be brought before the spirit kings to offer the final blade dances. At this point, even if a member had been lost, all five members would continue into the finals.

"—Good fortune and divine blessings upon the blade dancing princess maidens!"

The five spirit maidens reading the oracle from the spirit kings spoke this in tandem.

That signified the beginning of the battle.

Amidst the deafening cheers, the elementalists entered the transportation circle drawn above the altar.

Just before the transportation circle, Kamito turned to face his ojou-sama comrades.

"Everyone, we will definitely win!"

"Yes♪" "Yeah!" "Of course!" "That, um, that was my line!"

Ordesia's former second princess, Fianna Ray Ordesia.

Captain of the Sylphid Knights, Ellis Fahrengart.

The eldest daughter of the house of Laurenfrost, Rinslet Laurenfrost.

The younger sister of the Calamity Queen, Claire Rouge of the house of Elstein.

And the winner of the last Blade Dance three years prior — Kazehaya Kamito.

The four girls and one boy, each with their own «Wish », moved to challenge the «Blade Dance».

Part 3

After stepping into the transportation circle, a mysterious forest opened up in front of him.

Slight fog obscured his vision. Cries of birds and beasts could be heard from afar.

"Inside a forest, huh.....there are countless places enemies could conceal themselves....."

Claire, who transported in directly after him, gave a cursory look at the surroundings.

"Should I have my wind familiar search the immediate area?"

"That's right.....no, it may be better not to. It's not that I don't trust Ellis' abilities, but spirit magic users will instantly discover us."

".....That's true."

Ellis nodded at Claire's deduction.

"My Fenrir will carry everybody's belongings."

Rinslet summoned the magic ice spirit with her finger.

The blizzard-clad Fenrir raised a war cry.

In an instant, five peoples' worth of luggage was sucked into its opened mouth and disappeared.

"That's convenient."

"The Laurenfrost territory's population is isolated, so having Fenrir carry goods is a life saver."

Rinslet petted Fenrir's head and it gave out a sweet whine.

"Mu, Scarlet is cute but Fenrir is also cute....."

Ellis gazed at Fenrir with an expression like her heart was stolen.

"The freezing coldness at the Laurenfrost's is enough to kill. Or rather, I was stranded in the garden that time I came to the main house to play when we were kids."

"When I found you, you hugged onto me and sobbed... ...sigh, where did the cute Claire from back then go, I wonder?"

Rinslet sighed with a faraway look.

"Y-You.....if you say anymore, I'll turn you into cinders!"

"How wide was the garden if you managed to get stranded....."

To the side of the two was a dumbstruck Kamito.

"We should also find a camp site or we'll freeze to death."

"Yeah, that's right."

Kamito nodded.

Even though this was within Ragna Ys, whether it was because the wind spirit king's divine protection was weak or something, it was definitely cold. The academy's school uniform also had built-in «cold protection», but it didn't seem like it would be effective against the night's cold.

"It's also important to secure a water supply. It would be good if there was a river or lake nearby."

Claire's suggestion wasn't just for drinking water, it was also for the required purifications an elementalist needed to undertake to remove any taint.

"At any rate, that means the first thing is to search the surrounding area. Our formation will consist of me as vanguard, Rinslet and Fianna in the center, and Ellis and Kamito in the rearguard.

Claire proposed a logical formation.

Fianna who was weak at battle was in position to be protected by everyone and Rinslet was able to see in every direction. Kamito who possessed great power was positioned to monitor the surroundings and the two who possessed great one-on-one strength, Claire and Ellis, were stationed at each end.

Kamito and company got into formation and began to advance through the forest.

Part 4

They had walked in the forest for roughly half an hour .

From a while ago, ball-like light spirits had frequently flitted around overhead.

They were the spirits for the purpose of relaying the Blade Dance from the field back to the great shrine.

It seemed they were trained not to intrude on their privacy, but currently there was no doubt that Kamito and the others were being displayed on-screen.

"We haven't found any signs of water. Just how large is this place?"

"It should be considerably large. «Ragna Ys»'s size is comparable to a small country."

Claire, who was walking in front, answered Kamito's question.

"It looks like we'll need to create a map soon."

Rinslet said as she removed a branch from her hair.

"......My feet have started to hurt a little."

Fianna, who wasn't used to hiking, said with a grimace .

Unlike Claire and the others, she had transferred in and hadn't undergone the same open field training.

"Shall I carry you?"

"Eh? N-No, it's fine....."

At Kamito's words, Fianna's face reddened and she shook her head.

"Don't push yourself. It's too late if you become unable to walk."

"B-But, I.....that is, I'm wearing this short skirt....."

"Th-That's true....."

.....As expected, even the queen that always teased Kamito would be embarrassed by that.

"Kamito, you're thinking about such indecent things again!"

Ellis drew her sword.

"I-I'm not thinking them! Or rather, what's this again about!"

"Hmph, m-my foot hurts.....maybe."

Ellis chewed her lip like she was pouting.

Looking at her condition from before, that didn't seem to be the case but,

"I-Is that so?.....but, as expected, carrying two people is a little harsh."

"M-My foot also started to hurt suddenly!"

"Yes, lending me just your sh-shoulder would help greatly!"

"Yeah, I can do that much."

"I-Is that so? T-Then, I shall take you up on that."

Rinslet smiled and moved over to his shoulder.

"......!"

The uniform that lightly smelled of sweat.

His heart throbbed at the soft sensation touching his arm.

".....Th-That's unfair, Rinslet! Kamito, please lend me your shoulder as well!"

For some reason unbeknownst to him, Ellis also latched onto his shoulder.

"Th-Then.....me as well♪"

Fianna also rested her head on his shoulder from behind.

"Th-This is difficult....."

Being hugged by three girls, he let out an anguished voice.

"Hey, you three! The formation is falling apart!"

"Fufu, you're not honest. Even though it'd be fine for Claire to say her feet hurt as well."

"Wha.....a, aren't you being stupid!? I'm fine, I can walk on my own!"

Claire cried out angrily with a red face at the teasing Fianna.

"....."

And Kamito stopped walking.

"Kamito-san, what's wrong?"

"Be quiet. We're being ambushed."

"....!?"

The three separated from Kamito and summoned their respective contracted spirits.

A silence like the drawn bowstring of a bow.

No, this isn't silence — it's inaction.

Kamito sharpened his senses and searched for presences.

Two people. They're scouts or there are others with them.

"It's unexpected. That we would find a trap this early."

"Yeah, even though it shouldn't be a good plan to act this quickly—"

Right after Kamito nodded.

"—They're coming!"

A flash of light exploded.

Part 5

.....A distraction, huh!

What had exploded was a depth charge spirit stone embedded in the ground that was prepared beforehand.

It was a substitute that looked flashy but had no power .

But it had made an opening for an instant.

In tandem with it, Kamito felt determined presences moving in.

.....From below!

He felt the flash was to disrupt him. Kamito trusted his instinct and jumped.

Right after. The place Kamito had been at just before was replaced with a giant arm of sand.

As he thought, there were others as well.

The sand mass wriggled and stretch towards his arm —

"I won't allow that, freezing fangs, pierce — Freezing Arrow!"

Rinslet's ice arrow pierced the sand arm.

"Kamito, above!"

Claire warned him.

Kamito kicked the ground and jumped-—

"—Crush them to death, stone beast spirit «Gargoyle»!"

The shadow that instantly fell to the ground. The gigantic mass that fell from above.

Earth and sand danced in the air as the ground tremored.

The spirit that had taken the form of a stone goblin. The elementalist girl rode on its back.

The beautiful pure white uniform.

"If I recall, that's the Kingdom of Balstan's.....

"—O master swordsman, become my shield!"

From further up the path appeared Fianna's knight spirit.

The knight's sword drew a shining arc. The sound of stone being crushed rang out and the stone beast's arm was destroyed.

Two seconds after the flash, his eyes had finally recovered.

The ojou-samas got into formation around Claire.

I can't really blade dance without Est, but—

He created a short sword using his basic spirit magic.

He attempted to circle around in the disturbance — just then.

Sending earth and sand flying, a sand giant appeared before him.

"Tch.....!"

Kamito widened the gap while clicking his tongue.

The sand spirit user — just where are they?

Kamito quickly ran his eyes over the surrounding area.

The first theory was that the elementalist had used their spirit's earth attribute to hide underground with spirit magic. But there were no traces of such.

A second presence appeared behind him—

The second one.....!

From the shadow of the trees appeared a girl wielding a saber.

An invisible splitting flash split the tree behind Kamito .

Kamito covered himself and dodged.

"To dodge my blades of wind, as expected of the male elementalist."

The girl shouted that as she turned to face him.

"For the act of embarrassing my master — sorry, but I'll have you disappear here!"

"So it's really revenge for that idiotic prince, huh....."

Kamito sighed, astonished.

There were those who foolishly dragged their trivial personal grudges into the Blade Dance.

".....I sympathize with you. Spirit contractor of Balstan."

"I won't allow ridiculing my master!"

The wind elementalist girl swung the saber.

Kamito dodged to the side by jumping. The blades of wind lightly grazed his neck.

.....Although if I had Est, that kind of attack would be nothing.

The storm of wind blades that flew in every direction prevented Kamito from closing in.

"Hah, it seems you really can't fight without a contracted spirit!"

.....Why does she know I lost Est?

As he raised suspicions, at that moment — bluish-white lightning came from behind him.

He instantly turned his body and repelled it with his spirit magic sword.

The sword burst into grains.

Facing to the direction it came from, a girl stood there with an Elemental Waffe bow.

"No way, he reacted to that surprise attack just now!?"

The wind elementalist widened her eyes in shock.

"It's because I knew another person would be hiding."

Kamito shrugged.

"As I thought, you're dangerous. We have to crush you while you can't use your contracted spirit."

"You're overestimating me quite a bit."

He observed the surroundings without letting down his guard as he jested.

Behind was the saber-wielding wind elementalist. In front was the bow-wielding lightning elementalist.

And the sand giant also appeared behind him.

.....Three skilled elementalists. As expected, it's tough.

Cold sweat gathered on his temple.

From some point in time, a thick fog had coated the forest.

It wasn't natural fog. It was obviously created with spirit magic.

Claire and others should be fighting against that stone beast spirit from before not too far away but because of the fog, he couldn't hear sounds of the battle or their voices at all.

From the start, this plan was for taking me down, huh—

This time's Blade Dance was a battle of attrition.

There was no need to defeat all of the enemy team at once.

He didn't know where they'd received information about his losing Est, but they had aimed for Team Scarlet who had lost their strongest force.

The two elementalists battling with Claire and the others were likely just buying time.

Then I'll also buy time. Just hold on until Claire and the others come—

Kamito gripped his hands and took half a step.

"It's useless!"

The wind elementalist waved her saber and created blades of wind.

But Kamito didn't stop. Slightly shifting his center of gravity, he dodged by a hair's breadth.

"He can see my wind blades!?"

"—It's a pity but their paths are easy to read in a forest!"

The blades themselves were invisible, but he could see the leaves and branches they cut. After being shown the attack so many times, Kamito had discerned their speed and width.

Of course, to actually carry it out required an extraordinary sense and courage.

Messing up just a tiny bit would mean the end. Due to the rules, his head wouldn't fly but his consciousness would.

Accelerating, he closed in on the wind elementalist.

"You, I won't let you!"

Immediately, an arrow of lightning came towards him — however,

That instant, Kamito disappeared.

"Wha!?"

Kamito had kicked the ground and flew straight up.

The battle techniques that had been hammered into him at the «Instructional School» — Meta three-dimensional movement.

The other orphan from the «Instructional School», Jio Inzagi, had also used this move, but his speed did not match the overwhelming version of Kamito's «Shadow Weaving».

Weaving between the branches of the trees, it was a technique of moving at top speed in all directions to toy with the opponent. Amongst the elementalists that had received ordinary battle training, there were none that could do this.

Kicking the trunk of a tree, Kamito accelerated. The wind elementalist and lightning elementalist fired at the afterimages he left behind and hit nothing.

"—Sandman, topple the trees around you!"

The wind elementalist shouted sharply.

The sand spirit roared and knocked down the surrounding trees.

Despite its dull-looking body, it was unexpectedly fast. He had fought with members of the earth attribute — such as rock, but this was the first type that had such mobility.

"Tch....."

Losing his footholds, Kamito had no other choice but to land.

"—O wind, blow wildly!"

The blades of wind from the side severed the sand giant's arm.

The blue ponytail waving in the wind.

Ellis who had her Elemental Waffe «Ray Hawk» in hand.

"—Ellis, that's a great help."

"Sorry for being late. The mist spirit caused me trouble ."

Ellis landed lightly and readied her spear with magnificent movements.

"Kuu, the plan is a failure, huh.....retreat!"

The enemy wind elementalist's judgment was quick.

The plan to take Kamito out with a swift attack coupled with a surprise attack had failed. There was no point in fighting any further.

"—Like I'll let you run!"

Ellis waved Ray Hawk.

Ellis' magic wind spirit was several tiers above the opponent's wind spirit. While cutting down the trees in its path, the wind blades attacked the retreating elementalist.

In its path — the sand giant stood up.

The blades of wind landed a direct hit. The wind elementalist and lightning elementalist had disappeared into the forest.

Ellis bit her lip in frustration. The sand spirit immediately began to rebuild.

However, at the moment the front had been blown open, Kamito realized.

I thought its movements were too good.....so you hid there.

The sand gathered again and completely resealed its wound --- just before that.

Kamito instantly jumped into the sand's opening --- he punched through the giant's solar plexus.

It was the feeling of sand that greeted his fist.

The rebuilding sand giant crumbled in moments.

The one that appeared from within was a girl who had fainted.

"What does this mean?"

"That sand giant was her Elemental Waffe."

Kamito shrugged and answered Ellis' question.

"......Sorry. I'll be taking this."

Kamito leaned down and took the «Magic Stone» from around the girl's neck.

If they waited one minute, this girl would be transported back to the grand shrine.

"Kamito!" "Kamito-kun!" "Were you okay?"

Claire and the others came running from the other side of the forest.

It seems the other fight had also reached a conclusion.

"Are you guys also unhurt?"

"Yeah......rather, don't tell me you defeated them without a contracted spirit?"

Claire widened her ruby eyes.

"No, it would have been dangerous if Ellis hadn't come . They ran away in the end."

"Here," he said as he tossed the «Magic Stone» to Claire.

At that time, the fainted sand elementalist was enveloped by a transportation circle and disappeared as shards of light.

"We defeated a stone beast elementalist. The mist elementalist got away."

Claire gripped the two «Magic Stones» in her hand.

"It's dangerous to chase them too far. They seem like a meticulous team."

"At any rate, I never thought we would be attacked this quickly."

"Yes, it seems like it would be a good idea to find a camp site quickly."

Claire nodded at Ellis' words.

As expected, they weren't going to be elated at their first victory.

Kamito turned to the road forward that was covered in the remnants of the depth charge spirit stone.

The mysterious thing is how they managed to ambush us.

Even though it hadn't been even an hour since the start , they had moved like they knew Kamito and the others' location.

Also, they knew that I've lost Est.

Just who was leaking information, he wondered.

"....."

Kamito dropped his eyes to the spirit seal on his right hand.

In the end, even when Kamito's body clearly felt danger, the «Gate» had shown no signs of opening.

"Est....."

Part 6

"As expected, Kazehaya Kamito—"

The ones watching the first day of the Blade Dance from afar.

Seated on a slightly elevated hill were five girls in military uniforms.

One of those favored to win this time's competition, The Principality of Dracunia's representatives, «Knights of the Dragon Emperor».

They were using the dragon attribute spirit magic « Dragon Eye» to observe far away.

"That is why he is suitable to be sacrificed to the dragon sleeping within me."

The girl standing at the cliff edge — Leonora Lancaster licked her lips.

With ferocity emanating from her entire body, her eyes gleamed like blood.

Leonora-sama's «Dragon Blood» is awakening.....

Apparent fear painted Vice-captain Yuri El Cid's face.

Shivers ran down her spine.

The strange power inherited by those who served dragons — «Dragon Blood».

This was Yuri's fourth time seeing Leonora with red eyes.

The first time she had witnessed it was two years ago at the entrance examination for the Knights of the Dragon Emperor. Leonora had obliterated all other contestants within minutes.

It was a mad dance that would feel like it would cause casualties.

If the «Dragon» within her woke up, not even her subordinates could stop her.

But this time seems a little different from usual.....

Yuri looked upon Leonora's side profile.

Looking at her appearance, she seemed calm.

For some reason, her interest was only directed at one person and she wanted to slaughter only that male elementalist.

Leonora stood there looking upon the landscape in silence.

"—Tonight, we hunt a pack of lions."

Yuri and the others nodded wordlessly.

That was the signal of an attack for the Knights of the Dragon Emperor.

Chapter 8: The Temptation of Darkness

Part 1

The night before leading the continent's combined military force to attack the maou's castle—

"—Hey, Est?"

The sacred maiden Areishia asked Est.

"Yes."

"If I wasn't here anymore, what would Est do?"

Unlike humans who returned to the soil, spirits had no life span. No matter how strong a bond was with a contracted spirit, one would always have to part with them.

At Est's puzzled gaze, the girl continued.

"If I'm not here anymore, Est has to make sure to find a new elementalist to contract with, okay."

"I don't want to."

Est replied without hesitation.

The ever-docile sword spirit disagreed with her master for the first time.

"Est?"

"I am your sword. I will not become anyone else's."

"Est....."

"Master, why are you asking such a thing?"

"That is....."

She put on a troubled expression.

Everything about what her destiny would lead to in the nearby future — a face that knew all of this.

Part 2

And thus the sacred maiden and legendary sword went to meet the end of the story.

After several years of wars, the sacred girl Areishia launched an attack on the maou's castle.

Defeating scores of enemies, the pure girl's hand was already soaked in blood, but still she did not lose hope.

—That after this battle would be a world of peace.

While knowing the fate of her body, she continued to fight.

The voice of the girl rang through the castle's banquet hall.

"—Est, lend me your power!"

"Yes, master!"

The strongest holy sword gripped in both her hands gave off dazzling light.

Pushing back the darkness, the girl ran while aiming for the maou's heart.

"Est, this is the last time I use you as a sword. That's why—"

Everything happened in an instant.

The holy sword shone and burst the maou's heart with a flash.

Giving off a dying cry of agony, the maou was vanquished from this world.

Part 3

"Haa, haa, haa....."

Basked in the demon king's black blood, the girl collapsed to the ground.

"Master?"

"It's okay.....Est....."

In order to calm the worried Est, she patted her head.

"Fua.....master.....please stop."

"Fufu, you like this, don't you, Est."

"......Please don't tease me."

Though Est maintained an expressionless face, she turned her head with slightly reddened cheeks.

This was the first time since she had met her that Est had shown such a reaction.

The girl was happy with that.

For the girl that had gradually killed off her human emotions in line with the peoples' expectations of her as the Sacred Queen, this was her sole comfort.

"Sorry, Est......the truth is, I wanted to pat your head like this more....."

Covered in black blood, the girl's voice wavered.

"Master, what are......what are you saying?"

"......Really, I'm sorry."

"Master?"

In the next instant, the girl fingers made a stiff sound and shattered.

Part 4

"—Kamito. Hey, Kamito."

"Mmm.....Claire?"

While having his shoulders shaken, Kamito awoke.

A nice scent drifted near his nose. The twintails upon his cheeks tickled slightly.

"Come on, the meal is ready. Wake up already."

"It will get cold if you don't get up quickly."

Kamito rubbed his eyes and lifted his upper half from the hard ground.

The sun had already begun to set when Kamito and the others finally found a camp site.

It was beside a gently flowing mountain stream. Edible fish were present and the water was suitable for purification. After making a simple tent and leaving the meal preparations to the girls, Kamito had taken a nap in preparation of being the night look-out.

Night had already completely fallen.

Walking to the riverside where there was a table built from the trees, he found a luxurious evening meal on it.

Smoked fish from the river, seasoned risotto, and soup made with dried vegetables. These were from opening some of the many canned food that Claire had brought.

"Is it okay to eat this extravagantly from the first day?"

"Because it's the first day, delicious food is necessary to raise morale."

"Well, that does sound reasonable.....and this looks seriously good."

Kamito sat down on a rock and began with the steaming risotto.

"......!"

"H, how is it?"

Rinslet asked while seemingly nervous.

"......Insanely good! Did you really make this with canned stuff?"

"Yes.....I, I'm glad it suits your taste."

Rinslet smiled broadly in a happy manner.

"As expected of Rinslet."

"Kuu.....m, my position is....."

Ellis seemed a little down as she sighed that.

"Ah, no, Ellis' cooking has a homemade feeling to it and I like that in its own way."

"H, homemade.....you say.....? Home.....wife....."

He didn't know what she was imagining but Ellis had zoned out with a red face.

"T, tomorrow, I'll be making dinner.....so I'll make Kamito's favorite dishes."

"Yeah, I'm looking forward to it.....by the way, what are we doing about baths?"

"We made one nearby. Scarlet worked hard."

Scarlet who was laying beside Claire let out a nyaa.

"Fufu, it's fine to enter with Kamito-kun ♪"

"Eh?"

"I, idiot, Kamito goes in after! Stand guard here!"

Claire said angrily with a beet red face.

Part 5

"W, what are you thinking, you!"

"Oh my, I was just teasing you a little. And Claire, weren't you a little tempted?"

"Wha.....that's not true!"

"You're too loud! Even if we're inside a barrier, don't let your guard down!"

"Though the knight captain is being the loudest."

"......S, sorry."

A little away from the camp site, the girls were undressing.

Next to them was an open air bath with dense steam.

It was not a hot spring. Having Georgios carry large rocks to isolate a section of the river, they had Scarlet release its flames there.

The light splash of someone entering the water.

Having removed their academy uniforms, the princess maidens' skins were exposed to the night moon's faint radiance.

"E, Ellis, you were wearing quite mature underwear, weren't you....."

"I, is that so?"

Ellis averted her eyes in embarrassment.

"T, to use black.....how lewd....."

Claire leered at Ellis' breasts coldly.

"I, it's not lewd! Kamito chose them—"

"Eh?"

"Wh, what do you mean?"

"Ah, no, that's, umm....."

Under the questioning glares, Ellis who had dug her own grave retreated.

"Claire, haven't you grown a little as well?"

Fianna groped Claire's chest.

"Fuaaa, wh, what are you doing, you erotic queen!"

"......Was it my imagination? It feels like they've grown a little since I last groped them."

"......Eh? R, really!?"

Claire's red twintails jumped a little.

"D, don't tell me that thing of the lightning spirit from yesterday was effective....."

"What are you talking about?"

"......I, it's nothing!"

Claire sunk under the water surface and blew bubbles.

Part 6

He could hear the girls' excited voices from afar.

As expected, not even Kamito with his good hearing could make out their words.

Kamito was keeping surveillance from a rock's shadow . There were also spirits that gained strength with the coming of night. Unlike the matches at the academy, one also had to be vigilant of a night attack.

"....."

Drawing a breath, he looked down at the spirit seal engraved on his right hand.

Est.....

The past memories of Est he had caught a glimpse of.

The dream about Est's former master, the Sacred Queen who slew the maou.

I cannot become Kamito's sword — saying that, Est had rejected Kamito.

Just what had Est remembered—

And then.

In the forest in front of him, a faint presence appeared.

"......!"

Kamito stood up on reflex and entered a battle stance.

.....Don't tell me they broke Fianna's barrier!?

A barrier that let them know when a person or beast got near was supposed to have been erected.

The problem was who had managed to bypass the barrier without setting it off.

"—Who are you."

Kamito glared into the grove of trees.

And.

"Don't make such a scary face, Kamito."

Before his eyes, the swirling darkness took human form.

The one who appeared there was a beautiful girl clad in a dress the color of darkness.

"......Restia!?"

Kamito widened his eyes and looked upon the girl in front of him.

His previous contracted spirit.

The one he had always wanted to meet, an irreplaceable treasured existence.

The one that had first given light to the Kamito who had lost his heart.

But now, she was—

"......What did you come here for?"

"How cold, even though I was worried about you."

Restia almost unnoticeably pouted.

That gesture was so dearly missed that Kamito's heart ached.

As the dress fluttered, Restia slowly walked towards him.

"It's not like you to have a hard fight against opponents of that calibre."

"Were you the one who told them I lost Est?"

"Yes, that's right."

Having Restia admit it so frankly felt anticlimactic.

Because of that, he didn't know what to say next.

I've always gotten caught up in her pace.....

Restia came just in front of him and gazed up at his face with her twilight-colored eyes.

It was about the same as three years ago except that Kamito was now taller.

Contrasting with the darkness was smooth white skin. Faintly pink lips.

It was magnificence that made his heart beat unconsciously.

And the sweet whisper that came from her lips.

"If you can't use your contracted spirit, you can use me ."

"......What, what did you?"

"It's not really that surprising. I am still your contracted spirit."

"......After all this time, what are you planning?"

Kamito bit his lips.

It was true that he still had Restia's spirit seal on his left hand but—

The «Gate» had never opened even once since that day .

"That's because you didn't have the requirements, Kamito. But with your latest power that awakened — you can use me again just like before."

Restia smiled cutely with a little laugh.

"I....."

Kamito stared at his leather-gloved left hand.

The Elemental Waffe he had used three years ago as Ren Ashbell — «Vorpal Sword».

The power of that demon sword to cut everything was comparable to Terminus Est.

Without Est, winning the Blade Dance was impossible.

But if his former contract spirit returned to him once again—

He could even win against that other Ren Ashbell.

"However, I have a condition."

And. Restia put her index finger to her lips.

"A condition?"

"Yes, you have to sever your contract with that other sword spirit."

"......!?"

"Did you think I wouldn't be jealous if you contracted another spirit?"

Restia whispered into his ear with a sullen tone.

Kamito — grabbed Restia's shoulders and separated her from him.

"Sorry, but I can't do that."

And decisively shook his head.

"I believe in Est. That she will definitely return."

He had lived the past three years for the sake of getting Restia back.

The reason he had participated in this «Blade Dance» was for the same reason.

But he could not sever the contract with Est for that.

"Est is an important partner of mine.....the same as you."

"I see — that's a pity."

Restia shook her head sadly.

"But I wonder if you can defeat her without a contracted spirit."

"Her?"

At the same time he asked, Restia's figure faded out and started to disappear.

"Wait, Restia!"

"I'm always waiting, Kamito. Until you call me — okay ?"

Restia completely dissolved into the darkness.

The next instant, a blaze fell from the sky.

A violent flash. The resulting wind blast blew Kamito away.

The earth and sand that flew collapsed the forest's trees.

What.....the.....!?

While groaning, Kamito lifted his face.

And.

From the epicentre of the explosion, a giant black shadow stood up.

"Wha!?"

It was a jet black dragon with wings that spread as if to eclipse the moon.

The flames that blazed lit up the night.

A girl wearing a black surcoat walked out from within the dancing flames.

Her red eyes penetrated the night.

What an ominous presence.....

An oppressive feeling that could even be felt on one's skin.

".....What a rude greeting for a knight. Leonora."

"—As you say, Kazehaya Kamito."

Leonora said with her hand straight up in the air.

"The dragons of Dracunia hunt lions with all their strength."

The dragon spirit «Nidhogg» opened its mouth and released an inferno.

Chapter 9: Demon Slayer

Part 1

"......No way, an attack!?"

At the time that a flashy explosion came from the camp site.

Claire and the others were in the middle of getting changed after finishing bathing.

"The barrier's been broken --- they're coming!"

In sync with Claire's scream.

Fianna, Ellis and Rinslet summoned their respective spirits.

Scarlet's flames lit up the surrounding darkness.

And above the steam were the silhouettes of three people with drawn weapons.

"What a surprise. The favored Knights of Dragon Emperor coming to attack in the night like this."

"We are soldiers before we are knights. To bring victory and pride back home, we will not pass up the most effective methods."

The one who answered was a girl with boy-like short hair.

She readied her halberd «Elemental Waffe».

"We'll at least name ourselves. Knight of the Dragon Emperor Vice-Captain, Yuri El Cid."

"«Team Scarlet»'s Claire Rouge."

Claire quickly transformed Scarlet into the Flame Tongue.

While keeping her attention to the front, she whispered to Ellis behind her.

"Leonora isn't here. The explosion just now was probably her."

If it was her Nidhogg, then pulling off that much destruction in one blow was possible.

They had aimed for a time when Kamito was alone and come to crush him.

"No matter how good Kamito is, he can't win against Leonora without an Elemental Waffe."

".....I got it. I will go to support Kamito."

Ellis immediately understood Claire's intentions and began chanting her «Flight» spirit magic.

She kicked off the ground and flew into the night air lit by flames.

But.

"---I won't let you go to Leonora-sama!"

"What!?"

Another knight blocked Ellis' path.

An elementalist with a flying dragon spirit.

They had anticipated their actions and hid in the forest beforehand. And the opponent was a flying type dragon spirit. Ellis' spirit magic couldn't outrun that.

"......This is bad. We've been completely separated."

"Kamito....."

Turning to the direction the flames were rising from, Claire bit her lips.

Part 2

The blaze skidded across the ground.

Accompanied by a loud sound, flames coated the ground.

.....What destructive power!

Being blown away by the resulting wind force, Kamito fell to the ground.

Quickly getting up and opening his eyes---

A scene like the world's end spread out before him.

The ground was dug up like a mortar. The wall of fire ate away at the night's darkness.

On the other side of the wall of flames, the dragon spirit roared with intense ferocity.

The accompanying wind scattered the flames.

The jet black dragon flapped its massive wings.

Basked in the bluish white light from the moon, Leonora Lancaster walked towards him silently.

Holding her hand up, the dragon transformed into darkness.

The darkness then gathered and instantly formed a large demon sword.

"Dragon spirit «Nidhogg»'s Elemental Waffe --- « Dragon Slayer»."

Leonora muttered that indifferently and raised the demon sword.

Kamito felt it instinctively.

That's bad.....!

Just when he got up and dodged.

"---Destroy!"

Leonora closed the distance in an instant.

---Fast!

Just before the demon sword descended, Kamito jumped to the side.

The sound of the ground being crushed.

The demon sword had lightly grazed him and his white uniform had blood on it.

Kamito grimaced at the sharp pain from being cut.

.....Don't tell me she's completely materializing her Elemental Waffe!?

If Kamito had not dodged just now, he would have been split in half.

She was swinging her blade with the full intent of killing Kamito.

Is this the influence of that «Dragon Blood» Claire was talking about.....

Leonora's brilliant red eyes that were shining in the darkness.

A state where she lost the majority of her reason and became a berserker.

It was forbidden to kill your opponent in the Blade Dance. That's why elementalists generally limited the materialization of their Elemental Waffe and opted to causing damage with their divine power directly.

But just now, Leonora had seriously tried to kill Kamito.

"Tch---"

Kamito quickly chanted his Weapon Works spirit magic and created a short sword in his hands.

With Est's «Gate» closed, this was the best he could do with his divine power.

It was only a substitute that could take one strike from the aftershock of the opponent's sword before it shattered .

Jumping off the mud and just before landing --- Leonora swung her demon sword.

Bone-shattering force was created.

"Gahaa.....!"

The severe blade storm that continued without mercy.

Kamito rolled on the ground and just barely avoided that attack.

".....It's like she has no openings."

Cold sweat gathered on his brow.

They were movements unthinkable for a thin and delicate arm like that with such a large sword.

She was likely using dragon property spirit magic to supplement her muscle strength.

"---It's not enough.....make my blood boil even more, Kazehaya Kamito!"

The demon sword was swung again. Whilst emitting a dragon-like roar, the sword released a wave of energy.

Invisible fangs that would rip through flesh. It resembled Ellis' blades of wind, but the destructive power was on a different scale.

Slicing through the cut-preventive school uniform, blood dripped from his shoulder.

"Kuu, she's strong, as I thought.....!"

Kamito cursed as he wiped the blood from his lip.

The overwhelming divine power welling up in her entire body.

In a head-on battle, Kamito had no chance of winning right now.

---There's no other way but to draw this into a battle of attrition by retreating into the forest.

Along with the awakening of her «Dragon Blood» and that oppressive power, Leonora lost her ability to think calmly. If Kamito moved around stealthily, he could at least buy time.

It should wear down the insane divine power of the «Dragon Blood».

There was likely a time limit on how long she could fight in this condition. A normal elementalist's limit would be one minute. Leonora's was likely around five.

---If I can stay clear for five minutes, I can win.

Just as Kamito was about to retreat into the forest.

Giant flames rose up under the cliff near the river far away from him.

"Wha.....!?"

He didn't have to think about where it was. That was where Claire and the rest were.

"---It looks like they're engaged in battle with my subordinates."

Leonora's eyes glinted and she closed the distance in an instant.

"If you want to protect your comrades, you'll have to use your full power and defeat me!"

Leonora's demon blade approached him---!

Part 3

"---Become cinders!"

Waving her Flame Tongue, she cast the spirit magic « Fireball» at the same time.

Yuri El Cid --- the halberd elementalist was engulfed in flames.

"As expected, if it's a direct attack --- ehh!?"

"It's a pity but flame attribute spirit magic won't work against this «Lindwyrm»!"

Breaking through the wall of flames, a giant dragon with red scales charged towards her.

"Rinslet!"

"I know, freezing fangs, pierce --- «Freezing Arrow»!"

Aiming at the fire dragon's body in only a moment, she released the ice arrows.

But just before the arrows hit, the fire dragon breathed fire and melted them.

The arrows that barely struck also rebounded off the scales and disappeared.

"No way, my «Freezing Arrows» were.....!"

".....It's using dragon attribute spirit magic!"

Claire yelled as she erased the fire dragon's flames.

Dragon spirits' specialities were their overwhelming strength and their high resistance against magical attacks . Especially with their «Anti-magic Dragon Scales» on, their magical resistance against the five main elements multiplied.

For Claire and the others who used spirits of the five main elements, they were a truly difficult opponent.

"Claire! «Georgios» alone can't hold them back.....!"

And from behind came Fianna's concerned voice.

Her knight spirit was currently handling two of the dragon spirits.

Her opponents were the types without wings or scales --- the close-range specializing raging dragon spirits.

Swinging their giant claws and tail, they were slowly cornering the knight spirit.

The raging dragon spirits were far above in power. The reason they were being held at bay was that the knight spirit had techniques specialized to face dragons.

But there were two opponents. And they were being controlled by skilled elementalists.

As expected, not even the defense specialist knight spirit could reach a decisive conclusion with just a sword and shield.

"Fianna.....! Rinslet, please buy me some time!"

Claire immediately requested back-up but---

".....!?"

Ellis landed right in front of her.

".....Aguu!"

"Ellis!"

Looking to the sky, she saw the girl riding the flying dragon spirit dance in the air.

"I said so, I won't let you interrupt Leonora-sama!"

The flying dragon spirit roared, turned towards the fallen Ellis and released innumerable fireballs---

"You!"

Claire quickly swung her Flame Tongue and intercepted the fireballs in midair causing many explosions.

"Ellis, can you still move?"

"......Yeah, sorry. I'm fine."

The wound-covered Ellis held her «Ray Hawk» and unsteadily rose to her feet.

Ellis' spirit was top-class even within the academy. Even disregarding any advantages from battling in the air, to have been beaten so one-sidedly---

"These guys are strong on their own and their teamwork is much more refined than us."

"That's right....."

Claire painfully admitted the truth of Ellis' observation .

If either Claire or Rinslet had backed her up, Ellis should have been able to fight evenly.

But the opponent never let such an opportunity show.

"My Georgios is---"

"Haa, haa.....the compatibility with Lindwyrm was too harsh.....!"

At some point, they had been boxed in by the four members of the Knights of the Dragon Emperor.

The knight spirit was being pushed back by the two raging dragon spirits and Rinslet was completely worn out.

"---Elimination of the Ordesia representatives. A fair result for our first battle."

Yuri El Cid formed her fire dragon's halberd.

"This is the end. Claire Rouge."

Part 4

The demon sword that should have been swung---

Was stopped in midair.

"......Wh, what the!?"

Leonora's red eyes widened in shock.

While looking at the face of the violent but still-beautiful face of the girl, Kamito murmured.

"This was originally a technique for hiding while crawling."

Held against the wrist of Leonora's hand which held the demon sword was Kamito's arm.

He couldn't stop her demon sword's attack.

But it was different for the arm wielding the attack.

He had pressed his arm to her wrist just as she exhaled before the attack.

If he drew in when Leonora pulled back her sword and instead pushed with all his strength, it would create a lethal opening --- a simple yet effective taijutsu skill.

Logically, it was simple, but the timing required was fatal. It was not something an amateur could copy.

It was only because Kamito had undergone the harsh training of the «Instructional School» that he could carry it out in real combat.

Leonora's body froze into the position of swinging her sword.

"The technique of a knight without a sword --- alias « Sword Break». A heretical skill. To begin with though, this was the old hag Greyworth's and not the « Instructional School»'s."

"---I see. So this was the technique of the strongest spirit knight in the continent, Lady Greyworth."

The red eyes looked down at Kamito.

Eyes of a dragon that were painted with the joy of battle --- completely battle-crazy eyes.

"But clever tricks are nothing before absolute power..... .!"

Leonora's divine power rose explosively.

With an inhuman roar that shook the atmosphere, she pushed as if to crush him to death---

"---That's reckless, Leonora!"

At the moment the power balance broke, Kamito sent a palm strike to her solar plexus --- but,

Just before that, she jumped to the side --- it wasn't reactionary, just instinct.

Attacking Kamito's flank, a flash of light gouged out the ground.

The one that had sent out the attack was the ornament on the «Dragon Slayer»'s hilt. If he hadn't dodged, it would have pierced his heart without a doubt.

He jumped while spraying blood from his flank. Because he was dodging purely on instinct, he couldn't soften the landings.

Leonora was swinging the sword in every other direction.

The dividing horizontal slices of the blade. The shockwaves that seemed like they could crush all the bones in one's body.

Kamito's body was blown to the side and smashed into a rock.

.....My arm's bone.....!

Leonora didn't stop. She charged with increasing roars .

Kamito readied his spirit magic blade at his waist. He would match his opponent's timing and deliver a counter --- it was a dangerous gamble, but there was no alternative.

If I don't beat her quickly, Claire and the others will---

Leonora charged like a dragon, causing tremors as she approached.

He would have no mercy on her who was under the influence of the «Dragon Blood».

If he messed up the timing even slightly --- what awaited him was death.

The moment the clade of the sword entered his vision.

Kamito jumped off the rock behind him.

---I've got you!

Dodging by a hair's breadth, the perfect distance.

He didn't think a blade of this calibre would be able to pierce the magic strengthened Leonora, but there were other ways to fight. If he broke her stance and used several strikes, he should be able to affect even this tough dragon knight---

However.

"I said it, didn't I, that clever tricks won't work on me!"

Leonora Lancaster---

Aimed at Kamito standing before her and threw the « Dragon Slayer».

Wrapped in spiraling air currents, the large sword flew in a straight line.

"......!?"

Kamito had not anticipated this.

Kamito clicked his tongue and dodged but Leonora had already closed in---

"Damn.....!"

Kamito instantly used a spirit magic sword to guard. But the magically strengthened Leonora's fist went right through the sword and into Kamito's jaw.

His vision shook. As soon as he realized he was flying in the air, he smacked into the ground.

Goddamn.....throwing that huge sword one-handedly? It's too unreasonable.....

The point he had been wounded at. He cursed while confirming what parts could still move.

His ribs were cut and a few internal organs had failed.

His fingers had gone numb and couldn't move. It was already a condition unfit to fight.

"---More, make my blood boil more, Kazehaya Kamito. The «Dragon» sleeping within me wants to go crazy with you."

Leonora picked up the demon sword she had thrown and slowly walked towards him.

Like a dragon enjoying the hunt.

"---If not, you'll die."

".....Don't just say whatever you want."

While groaning from the pain, Kamito pushed off the ground and stood up.

More than before, the flames from the riverside had grown more vicious and black smoke rose from it.

Claire, Ellis, Fianna, Rinslet.....

He gripped his numbed fingers at the regret of not being able to protect them.

I can't win against Leonora Lancaster at this rate---

Kamito affirmed that calmly.

---That's right, if it stayed like this.

The spirit seal on his left hand ached. No, he had already noticed. Since not too long ago, the seal had been burning with feverish heat.

The «Gate» that had never opened since that day three years ago.

But now he could feel her calling out to him.

He just had to call her name. With just that, he would regain the strongest demon sword.

The power to defeat Leonora and save his female comrades.

The highest ranked darkness Elemental Waffe --- « Vorpal Sword».

He could return in an instant. To the Ren Ashbell of three years ago.

But that was under the condition that he severed the contract on his other hand.

The sword spirit girl that had closed her heart off in sadness and was alone in the darkness.

I---

Kamito's voice shook like a groan.

That was a momentary conflict. A loss of direction.

But he quickly raised his head and shook it.

He had already resolved it from the beginning.

I am Est's master!

Leonora's red eyes glared viciously as she approached---

"Kazehaya Kamito, I am disappointed in you."

The «Dragon Slayer» pierced Kamito's chest.

Part 5

Inside his consciousness that had sunk into darkness---

Kamito found a girl sitting down while hugging her knees.

The silvery white hair that shone brilliantly even in the darkness.

Her unblemished white skin was like a frozen blade.

"---Est."

Kamito placed his hand against the cheek of the sword spirit that had closed her heart.

The mysterious violet eyes widened in surprise.

"Kamito.....!"

"Est, I ask you --- lend me your power. I need you to protect our friends!"

Turning to the squatting Est, Kamito cried out.

But Est wordlessly shook her head.

"Kamito, I am sorry. I can't be your sword anymore."

"Why---"

"I will, one day, take away Kamito's life."

At that time, something cold was felt on Kamito's fingertips.

".....Est?"

Those were tears.

She was once a sword spirit that had shown not a single emotion.

When his fingers touched her, a whirlpool of emotions flowed into him.

The Sacred Queen and the «Demon Slayer» --- the last of their memories together.

Part 6

In front of Est---

The sacred maiden that had defeated the maou's body crystallized into a spirit stone.

"Mas.....ter.....?"

"Est, don't make that kind of face."

Areishia's right hand that could still move touched Est's cheek as she struggled to talk.

"I knew about this from the beginning."

She wore such an adult expression despite being only sixteen years old.

Seeing even those fingertips crystallize---

The sword spirit finally understood.

That this was --- a curse.

The combined resentment and curses of the spirits that had been slain by the holy sword's power thus far.

That had amassed until the limit and was eroding her master's body.

The «Demon Slayer» was a sword that destroyed all curses.

But those curses didn't disappear from this world. The holy sword that had absorbed those various curses would one day pass them onto its master.

The spirit weapon --- «Terminus Est» was not a holy sword.

Taking the user's life in exchange for granting enormous power was unmistakably the properties of a demon sword.

"No.....way....."

The girl's forgiving hand. Est could not watch as those fingers that had always gently pet her head hardened and became a spirit stone.

"Master! I didn't know! That I---"

"I know, Est."

Areishia smiled and gazed at Est gently.

"Master.....you knew that you would....."

"Yes. That's why it's not Est's fault."

While patting Est's silvery white hair, she slowly nodded.

But her voice wavered and tears gathered in those eyes .

It was obvious. In the face of death, there was no way she wasn't afraid.

That's why she wasn't anything like a sacred maiden.

She was just a normal sixteen year old girl.

"Master....."

"Good bye, Est. My only friend."

"No, you can't.....master.....!"

A small voice leaked from Est's lips.

"No.....Arei.....shia.....!"

".....That's the first time you've called my name. I'm hap.....py....."

".....!?"

With a clear sound, the girl's neck crystallized.

Est could do nothing but watch.

At the moment the girl who had revealed her heart for the first time shattered after becoming a clear crystal.

"Est, I---"

The hot tears dropped onto Est's cheek.

"Honestly, didn't want to become anything like a sacred maiden."

"---Areishia!"

A wail echoed through the maou's castle.

For the sacred maiden that bore the hopes of all people and had fought to this point alone---

That was her end.

And so Est sealed herself in the maou's armory.

So that nobody would contract the demon sword hidden deep within.

So she would never lose anybody important again.

She would never open her heart to anyone --- she solemnly swore that.

Part 7

"---I have no right to become Kamito's sword."

"....."

Kamito became speechless at Est's past that he had caught a glance of.

The girl that had given emotion to this spirit weapon girl that had none.

Est had stolen that girl's life herself with her curse.

That's why she closed her heart.

For how many hundreds of years, she had continued to separate herself from those who wanted to contract her.

So she would never be touched by anyone else again.

Kamito could not imagine how lonely that must have been.

"Est....."

Kamito rubbed the edge of Est's eye.

Those mysterious purple eyes blinked.

"Don't say you don't have the right. I need Est."

"You can't.....if you continue to use a demon sword like me, I'll steal your life!"

Kamito placed his hand on Est's head.

"I won't lose to that kind of curse."

He pet that beautiful silvery white hair.

"Fuaa.....Kamito.....stop, please....."

"I won't. Until you stop crying, that is."

"Kami.....to....."

"Est, your curse and your destiny as a demon sword, I'll take it all."

And then---

He hugged Est's delicate body to himself.

"So come back, Est!"

"No.....I will, to Kamito....."

To stop those words---

Kamito embraced Est and sealed her lips.

"....!?"

Est's eyes shot open in surprise.

That was the ritual to contract a top-level spirit.

The kiss of oath.

Kamito gently separated their lips.

"I'll say it once more, Est. I need you."

He yelled this out while holding her delicate body tightly.

"Become my sword, Est!"

In response to Kamito's powerful words---

"Kamito, I---"

Est's silvery white hair shined.

Part 8

"......Wha!?"

Leonora's red eyes widened.

From the right hand of Kamito who should've been knocked out, a strong light was shining.

"---Dispassionate Queen of Steel, the sacred sword that destroys evil!"

His quivering lips chanted the summoning spirit words.

"......!?"

Faced with the vigorous voice that had a mysterious edge to it, Leonora took a step back.

"......It can't be, the «Dragon» inside me is scared?"

The «Dragon Blood» was in a fully awakened state so she could understand, this was true fear.

And so---

"---Now form a sword of steel and be the power in my hand!"

As if to burn the eyes, a fierce light was emitted!

In front of Kamito, the «Gate» connecting a master and their contracted spirit opened.

The one that appeared was a girl with beautiful fluttering silvery white hair.

"......Es......t, thank you. For listening to my selfishness."

While pushing down on the hole in his chest, he smiled wryly.

"Kamito, I am your sword --- for as long as you wish."

The uniformed Est said that with the same expressionless face as always.

He wondered if the slightly red cheeks he could see were because of the flames.

"So you've called back the «Demon Slayer»....."

The radiance of Leonora's red eyes rose.

"This is the reason there is worth in defeating you!"

Roaring, she swung the «Dragon Slayer»---

"---Destroy, tyrannical demonic dragon!"

A crimson light shot out from the tip of the sword.

It blazed the ground and instantly disintegrated the trees in its path.

"---Est!"

But Est didn't avoid it and simply stood there.

With an expression like ice, she turned to the inferno and put out her palm.

"---I am talking with Kamito right now, so don't disturb us."

The inferno that raged over the earth was dispersed with ease.

"......!?"

Leonora widened her eyes in shock.

Est gave off a fierce aura that didn't match with her magnificent appearance.

"......Est, let's go!"

"Yes!"

Kamito shakily got to his feet and held Est's hand.

His chest wound opened and a large amount of blood splattered across the ground.

His arm's joints were dislocated, his ribs were broken.

It was a condition that could only be described as covered in wounds.

But for some reason, he knew he wouldn't lose.

Just having Est nearby seemed to send strength welling up from deep within him.

Kamito chanted the spirit words for releasing and Est's body scattered into light particles.

In the next instant, Kamito's hands were holding a silvery white shining sword.

Demon Slayer --- Terminus Est.

"Let's do this, Leonora Lancaster!"

Kamito shouted as he readied Est in both hands.

There was no need for clever tricks --- just one attack was enough.

"---Answer to the call of my blood, demonic dragon, rampage!"

Leonora also positioned her «Dragon Slayer» again and roared.

And both sacred sword users ran at the same time.

"Ohhhhhhhhhh!"

"Ahhhhhhhhhh!"

The wind from the swords dug into the ground and sent dirt and sand flying.

"---Taste the boiling of my blood with your body!"

The large sword being swung before his eyes.

Wrapped in enough divine power to blow him away if it even grazed, Leonora charged.

But Kamito did not fear it and instantly accelerated towards it.

There was nothing to fear.

Because Kamito now had the strongest sword.

"Est, your sadness and despair, I will put an end to all of it!"

When the two blades met, the «Demon Slayer» gave off a radiance---

And shattered the «Dragon Slayer» in one strike.

Part 9

".....No way, Leonora-sama was!?"

Yuri El Cid exclaimed.

The divine power she had felt coming from not too far away had stopped.

"Looking away in the midst of battle? We're being really underestimated."

The momentary opening provided by the iron wall dragon knight. Claire would not let it slip.

Swinging her Flame Tongue, she knocked the halberd from her hands.

"......Shit!"

"---Scarlet!"

The flame whip instantly reverted to a hellcat and attacked.

"Tch!"

Yuri kicked the ground and retreated.

"We're stopping the hunt. Retreat!"

"Yuri-sama!?"

"Leonora-sama lost."

"Wha.....!"

The face colors of the Knights of the Dragon Emperor's changed instantly.

But as natural-born soldiers, they quickly understood the situation and promptly followed the order, retreating into the forest.

"I won't let you! Freezing fangs, pierce --- Freezing Arrow!"

Rinslet shot her ice arrows, but they were blocked by the forest's trees.

"Kamito beat Leonora?"

"……It seems like that's the case."

Claire nodded as she looked in the direction of the burning camp site.

Part 10

"……Why are you not taking my «Magic Stone»?"

Leonora who was lying on the blazing ground asked.

Her mad red eyes had returned to a calm black.

……It seemed that the «Dragon Blood» had calmed down.

"I won't say it's a reward for helping me get Est back but---"

Kamito also fell down.

It was a much more delicate body than he had imagined.

Her noble face entered his eyes.

"This time I'll pardon you. And I'd like to blade dance with the real dragon knight Leonora rather than one influenced by «Dragon Blood»."

"......Naive, aren't you."

"......Well, the truth is I can't even move a finger anyway."

Kamito said so with a wry smile and Leonora turned her head with a red face.

"A, as I thought, you're dangerous.....in various ways."

"What's that mean? What are these various ways?"

"Y, you're quite noisy, you licentious beast!"

Leonora sent Kamito flying and stood up.

The «Dragon Blood» rampage seemed to have eaten up her divine power so she was shaky on her feet.

"I won't lose next time, Kazehaya Kamito."

"Yeah, me neither. I have no intention of losing."

Leonora smiled and disappeared into the flames.

"......Kamito is really a master with no fidelity."

Hearing the pouting voice of Est from overhead, Kamito passed out.

---And this time he didn't see that dream.

Epilogue

Kamito awakened on a stretcher in the tent.

It seemed Claire and the others had found the unconscious Kamito.

Bandages wrapped his injuries here and there. The clumsily wrapped portions were likely Claire's handiwork.

.....It looks like the ojou-samas were safe.

Just as he breathed a sigh of relief and got up---

"You still shouldn't be moving, Kamito."

"Owaa, E, Est!"

The fully naked sword spirit quickly lay down beside him.

.....No, there were, of course, knee socks covering her feet.

"Est....."

If it were the regular Kamito, this would be where he would scold her,

Well, I'll forgive her for today.....

Kamito hugged Est to himself.

"Fuwa.....Ka, Kamito!?"

Est's shoulders shook.

Because she always maintained a cool and expressionless face, that action was interesting.

".....I was lonely. I won't get mad today so stay with me here."

With a wry smile, he brought the blanket over Est's small body.

"Kamito....."

Est widened her violet eyes and attached herself to him.

Her mouth was lightly smiling in joy.

"Kamito, you're warm....."

"I see."

While Kamito's heart raced, he hugged the quivering Est's shoulders.

Under the blanket, Est told him various things about what happened after she vanished.

About the single moment when her «True Body» had connected with Kamito. But soon after that, the «Gate» had closed again so she now had a personality separate from that of the legendary «Demon Slayer».

Unexpectedly, the sacred maiden Areishia, which was a lost memory to the current Est --- is what it meant.

Her memory was fragmented, so her memory only really started from when they'd met about two months ago.

Kamito was confused for a while but---

".....At any rate, it's fine to just say that Est is Est, right ?"

"Yes, Kamito. That understanding is fine."

.....And since it seemed to work, he stopped thinking deeply about it.

Then---

"Kamito, are you really not regretting it?"

"Of course not. I won't say it twice."

Kamito replied decisively to Est's question.

"A cursed demon sword or whatever, Est is my sword --- from now on and in the future."

"But I will steal Kamito's life....."

"Hey, Est---"

Kamito interrupted.

"Est right now only has about a tenth of the past « Demon Slayer», right?"

"Yes, Kamito."

Est nodded from within his arms.

"So the curse is only a tenth of its original. If it's only that much, at the very least, I won't turn into stone during this Blade Dance."

Kamito stroked Est's hair.

"I didn't join the Blade Dance to have a «Wish» granted by the spirit king. But I have found a «Wish» I want to fulfill."

That was to remove Est's curse and make her into a true sacred sword.

"Yes, Kamito. I am your sword --- for as long as you wish."

She said it with the same expressionless face, but with great vigor behind it.

And at that time.

The entrance to the tent opened---

"Wha!?" "How shameless.....!" "Kamito-kun, how bold....."

Ellis, Rinslet and Fianna's jaws dropped open.

Then---

"Y, you, whwhwh, what are you doing!"

Gogogogogogogogogo.....!

Claire approached with her Flame Tongue in hand.

"W, wait, Claire, this is....."

Kamito quickly tried to make an excuse---

The fully-naked-except-for-knee-socks Est stood up in front of Claire.

"Wh, what is it....."

Claire faltered in front of her oppressive force.

"Kamito is my master."

".....E, even so, this is a problem about you sleeping together!"

"Claire also sleeps with Scarlet."

"S, she's a cat so it's fine!"

"I am a cat."

"Eh?"

"I am Kamito's sword. Kamito's kitten. Kamito's toy..... that's why there is no problem."

Having said that, Est clung onto Kamito.

"Fuaaa.....a t, toy.....wh, what are you saying!"

Claire yelled with a red face and teary eyes.

"Kamito said he would accept all of me."

"Wha, what is that.....Ka, Kamito is my slave spirit!"

Fianna patted the frustrated Claire's back.

"Claire, let's let Est have Kamito for a day. Just for today."

"Kamito-san, as I thought, you really like small girls!"

"To lay your hands on young girls, th, that needs to be fixed! Become neapolitan!"

The glaring Rinslet and Ellis who had drawn her sword both looked at Kamito with cold eyes.

"It is okay, Kamito. I will protect you."

"Please spare me the blade dancing....."

---The first night of the «Blade Dance» passed.

Afterwords

Author's

---Kamito, I am your sword. For as long as you wish.

And with that, it has been a three month silence. This is Shimizu Yuu.

The elemental fantasy "Seirei Tsukai no Blade Dance" has reached its fifth volume!

One night after the difficult fight with Muir from the <Instructional School>, Kamito loses Est and falls into despair. The ojou-samas attempt to cheer (through ecchi means) that Kamito up. The <Blade Dance>'s real battle starts while he still hasn't recovered Est. The mysterious Ren Ashbell. The awakened dragon knight, Leonora. And the truth about the legendary <Demon Slayer>.....!

In this fifth volume that touches upon Est's past, I've also packed in plenty of the battle x love comedy attributes!

Announcements. I was lent a small section in the anthology of MF Bunko J's extremely popular "Boku wa Tomodachi ga Sukunai," "Boku wa Tomodachi ga

Sukunai - Universe" (It goes on sale at the same time as Seirei volume 5). Sagara Sou-sensei, Yuuji Yuuji-sensei, Watari Wataru-sensei (and around fifty others), with such wonderful professional writers and the creator of the original work, Hirasaka Yomi, it feels like the tension is high. For fans of "Haganai" or the author, please give a it a read. Sakura Hanpen-sensei's godly cute illustrations are also included.

Sakura Hanpen-sensei also drew a wonderful front cover and illustrations. Thank you very much. Est's heartrending expression squeezed my heart.....hooray for half-nakedness!

Yoshihira Zenzai-sensei who is drawing the manga. Truly, thank you for drawing such a high-quality masterpiece. Claire with her hair flitting about is cute.

MFJ's hyper media producer, Shouji-san, I caused you a lot of trouble this time as well.

And the greatest thanks goes to you who has this in their hands!

The other day, a signing event was held and it made me very happy to be able to talk with those who read " Seirei".

Seeing the impressions on the online questionnaire spur me on. By the way, the knee socks spirit Est made a comeback to first place in the fourth volume popularity vote. Rinslet-ojou-sama moved from sixth to second place. Could this be the era of Est and Rinslet.....!?

"Now they won't call me Rin-whatsherface-san!" (From Rinslet)

---With that, next time is volume 6. Let's meet again in "The Strongest Blade Dancer (tentative)"!

January 2011, Shimizu Yuu

Illustrator's

Good to meet you or long time no see, it's Sakura Hanpen!
Est finally gets a cover illustration!
Somehow, I have a satisfied feeling!
I'm so glad.....Est-chan returned (´; ;`)
When I read the volume 5 manuscript, my heart was racing!
I really liked the heart-breaking beautiful Areishia-san.

Look forward to the next volume that's slowly building tension...!

Or rather, Kamito's really popular, huh.
I want him to explode! Damn it!

I'd really like to wake up next to a naked bishoujo in knee socks.
Somebody please quickly invent a way to travel into the 2D world.

Well then, I'll stop around here!
The next volume's cover might feature someone unexpected!

Also, Shimizu-sensei, when will you come to my house in maid clothes?

Shouji-san's eyes are glowing, so I'd better stop here.
Let's meet again in the next volume~ (ˆ)ノ